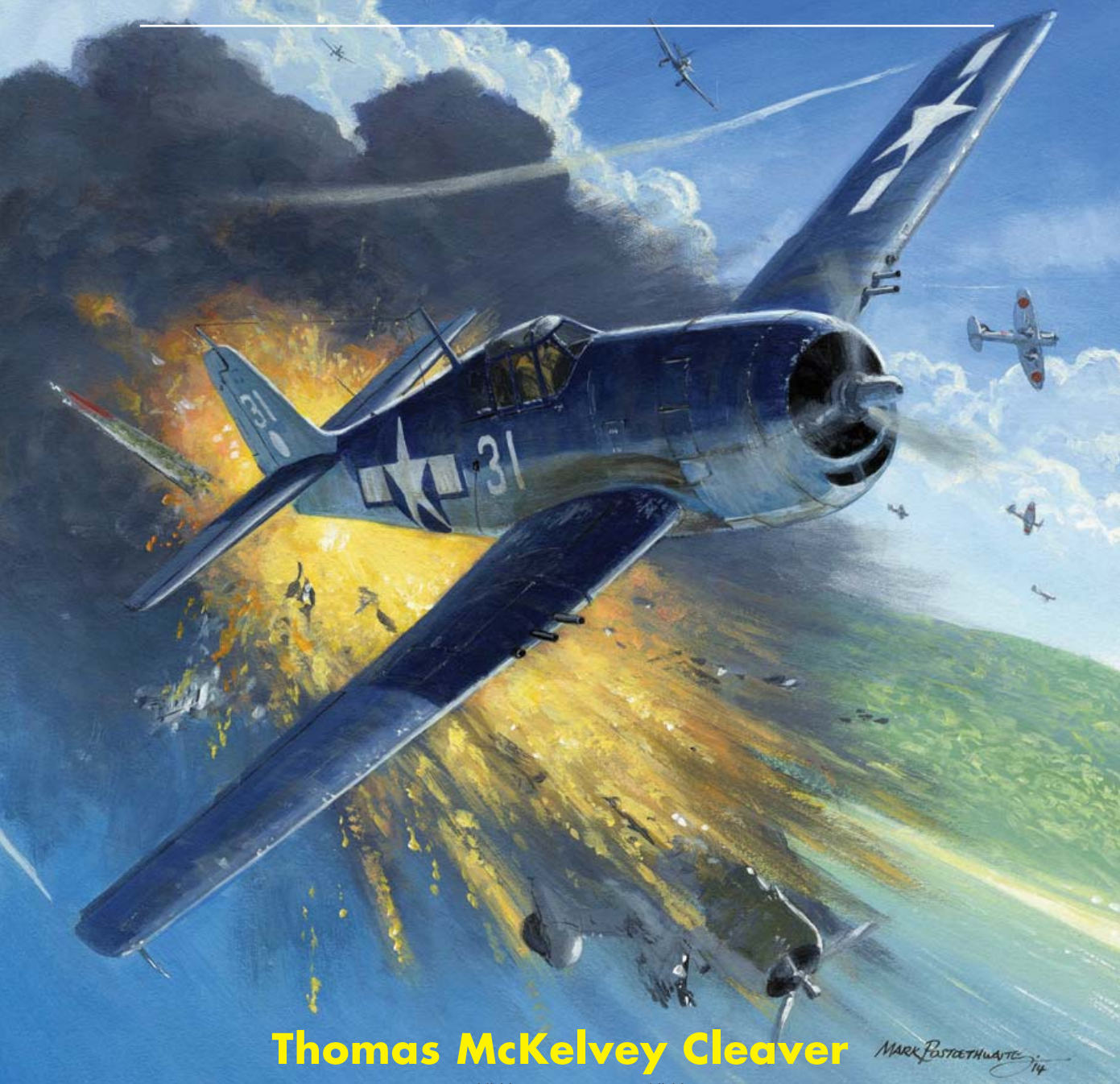


F4F Wildcat and F6F Hellcat Aces of VF-2



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Mark Posthumus

OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES 125

F4F WILDCAT AND F6F HELLCAT ACES OF VF-2

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INTRODUCTION

The four US Navy fighter squadrons that have carried the designation 'Fighting Two' (VF-2) over the years form a tradition that reaches back to the very beginning of American carrier aviation.

The original 'Fighting Two' was the US Navy's first carrier fighter squadron. The second, the famous 'Flying Chiefs', was instrumental in developing the pilots, aircraft, strategy and tactics that would lead to victory in the Pacific War, and participated in the Battle of the Coral Sea, history's first naval battle in which the opposing fleets never came within sight of each other. The third 'Fighting Two' became the fourth highest-scoring US Navy fighter squadron of the war, seeing action in the Battle of the Philippine Sea – an engagement that effectively destroyed Japanese carrier-based aviation for the remainder of the war. No fewer than 28 pilots achieved ace status during their tour of combat with VF-2 in 1943–44 – an American record that remains unbroken, and will likely never be challenged in the future. Chronicling their story has been a privilege.

The fourth 'Fighting Two', which is operational today flying F/A-18F Super Hornets as VFA-2, stands at the forefront of naval attack aviation. Indeed, it has participated in almost every American military action since the end of the Korean War.

Thomas McKelvey Cleaver
Los Angeles, California
September 2014

19 JUNE 1944

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1 9 June 1944 would be unlike any other day the pilots of the seven heavy and eight light carriers of Task Force (TF) 58 had yet experienced during the Pacific War. General Quarters sounded at 0300 hrs as crews bustled on flightdecks and hangar decks to prepare the F6F Hellcats, SB2C Helldivers and TBF Avengers for what lay ahead. Daylight broke to reveal an ominously placid sea as the morning reports carried forebodings of hectic hours ahead. Sleepy pilots shuffled into ready rooms to be met with the electrifying news that the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and the Mobile Fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) would meet in combat that day in the first carrier battle in the Pacific War since the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands some 20 months previously on 26 October 1942.

The 54 carriers, battleships, heavy and light cruisers and destroyers of Fifth Fleet combined to form the largest American combat fleet to ply Pacific waters – a far cry from the beleaguered force of two carriers, a battleship and a handful of cruisers and destroyers that had gone up against four Japanese carriers in a desperate attempt to maintain the American presence on Guadalcanal in those dark days of October 1942. Now the boot was on the other foot.

The air battles over the Pacific since the commencement of operations in the Central Pacific in October 1943 had continued the decimation of Japanese combat pilots that had begun in the Solomons on 7 August 1942 with the invasion of Guadalcanal. The invasions of Tarawa in November 1943 and Kwajalein in January 1944, coupled with the strike against Truk that February, had all but wiped out the few remaining veteran pilots and aircrews of the Imperial Japanese Naval Air Force (IJNAF). In this coming battle, their replacements would prove barely able to land and take off from an aircraft carrier, let alone engage in air combat. Their US Navy opponents would enter this action with a minimum of 600 hours' flight experience, and most had been engaged in combat since the beginning of the year.

So great was American power in the Pacific in the spring and summer of 1944 that the Japanese high command had mistaken the invasion of Biak, in the southwestern Pacific, on 27 May 1944 as the expected main American offensive. Japanese Combined Fleet commander-in-chief Adm Soemu Toyoda had decided on 10 June to oppose the invasion, sending the 1st Battleship Division under Adm Matome Ugaki to attack the Americans. The very next day Toyoda was stunned by reports of the arrival of Fifth Fleet off the crucially important Mariana Islands. The latter were the inner ring of defence of the Japanese Empire. With these islands under American control, air bases could be built that would put the new B-29 Superfortress in range of the Japanese homeland. The Japanese knew about the Boeing strategic bomber, and the threat it posed. There was no question that the invasion must be opposed.

The 15 aircraft carriers of TF 58 were under the command of Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher, and they had been given the task of providing air support to an amphibious force of 535 ships and 127,000 assault

troops led by Vice Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner. The Fifth Fleet commander, Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance, victor at Midway, was under orders from Adm Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief, US Pacific Fleet, to make the protection of the invasion forces his priority.

After intensive training operations to make good the aircraft and personnel losses incurred at Rabaul and Truk, this was the strongest Japanese fleet to put to sea in the war to date. The IJN carriers held more aircraft than their American counterparts, although the quality of the aircrew flying them was well below that of the US Navy.

By 19 June the Japanese were finally in range to launch their attacks. The day has gone down in history as 'The Marianas Turkey Shoot'. Commencing at about 0715 hrs, Hellcats of the fleet's combat air patrol began intercepting the first of what would be four major Japanese raids launched by the Mobile Fleet. By day's end more than 350 IJNAF aircraft had been shot down – a body blow to Japanese carrier aviation from which it would never recover.

Once the first wave of Japanese attackers had been shot down or beaten off, strikes were launched against the enemy airfields on Guam that the survivors and those arriving later would head for. Aboard USS *Hornet* (CV-12), CAG-2 was ordered to participate in the first of these strikes at 1030 hrs. F6F-3 Hellcats of 'Fighting 2' were assigned to escort SB2C-1C Helldiver dive-bombers of 'Bombing 2' and TBF-1C Avenger torpedo-bombers of 'Torpedo 2' in raids on Marpi Point.

One of the Hellcat pilots participating in this mission was Ens Wilbur B 'Spider' Webb, a native of Ardmore, Oklahoma, who had enlisted in the US Navy in October 1938 shortly after his 18th birthday. Following service in the gunnery and radio divisions aboard the battleship USS *Colorado* (BB-45), he was eventually assigned to the aviation division as a radioman-gunner flying in OS2U-1 Kingfisher scout aeroplanes. Webb's persistent requests for flight training finally resulted in him being ordered to Naval Air Station (NAS) Pensacola, Florida, in June 1942. Here, he earned his Wings of Gold as an enlisted Naval Aviation Pilot First Class in July 1943, being temporarily commissioned an ensign shortly thereafter. Webb joined VF-2 in Hawaii in December 1943 after its first combat cruise aboard USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), and he had participated in all the missions CAG-2 had flown since its arrival in the Western Pacific in late March 1944.

No Japanese aircraft were spotted during this first strike on Guam, although the attack aeroplanes were successful in damaging the airfields. At 1300 hrs a call was put forward for volunteers to fly a mission against anti-aircraft (AA) positions on Guam. Although he had already flown two sorties that day, Webb was ready for more. As he recalled to aviation historian Eric Hammel in 1990, 'I normally flew with Lt(jg) Tex Vineyard, who was the division leader for "Ginger 12" (our radio call-sign). I asked Tex if he wanted to go, but he replied in the negative. I advised the squadron operations officer that I would go. We were assigned as fighter escort for the strike group. I was to fly wing for Lt(jg) Conrad Elliott, and was the escort flight's "tail-end Charlie".'

The mission took off from *Hornet* at 1430 hrs, with Webb for once flying 'his' F6F-3 '31' – an event that almost never happened, since pilots were normally assigned aircraft for missions by their availability.



Ens Wilbur 'Spider' Webb smiles for the camera shortly after his 'ace in a day' exploits over Guam on 19 June 1944 (Wilbur Webb)



After landing back aboard USS *Hornet* (CV-12) following an uneventful morning mission on 19 June 1944, Ens Webb keeps a watchful eye on the flightdeck crew as they manually fold the wings of his F6F-3 Hellcat. Several hours later he took off in white 31, and duly made CAG-2 history (*US Navy*)

‘Takeoff and rendezvous were normal, and we proceeded to our assigned targets, climbing on course to 28,000 ft. On approaching the target, our division remained as high cover for the torpedo-planes and dive-bombers while they made their strikes, then we headed down to drop our 500-lb bombs and strafe our assigned targets around Agaña. After the strike on our assigned targets, we proceeded to make a running rendezvous across Guam to just off Orote Peninsula, which was on the west side of the island. We completed our join-up at 3000-4000 ft, after which the entire strike group turned back toward the *Hornet*.’

Just west of Orote Point, Webb spotted an American pilot in a rubber life-raft in the act of spreading his dye marker. Webb radioed his discovery to his section leader, Elliott, who quickly obtained permission from the strike leader, Cdr Jackson Arnold (CO of CAG-2), for Webb to provide cover for the pilot while he, Elliott, rounded up one of the OS2U Kingfishers assigned for rescue duty. As Webb recalled;

‘I arrived over the life-raft and lowered my speed by throttling back and lowering my wheels and flaps so that I could fly a tight circle around the downed pilot. My first thought was to throw him some more dye markers in the event that he was not picked up before dark, and also to give him another life-raft. I opened my canopy, took my knife out, cut two of the dye markers loose from my Mae West and threw them to the pilot in the water. I was circling him at about 100 ft. After throwing out the dye markers, I proceeded to remove my life-raft from under my parachute.’

As he did this, Webb glanced back at Guam, where he spotted a long line of aeroplanes wending their way through the mountains that ran down the island, apparently headed for the airfields at its northern end. ‘My first thought was “why are our aeroplanes flying along there with their landing gear down?”’ Webb quickly became aware of his mistaken identification of the aircraft. ‘The first aeroplanes were heading in my direction, and they got to within 100 yards of me before I realised that they were Japanese “Val” dive-bombers, with fixed landing gear, flying in divisions of three. There were aircraft above the “Vals” too – Zero-sens. When they reached the landing pattern for the field, they banked away, and I could see the large red meatballs on their sides. I estimated that there

were 30 to 40 aeroplanes in all. I was not very concerned about my position at the time. I just thought, "Boy, this is it. Make it good and get as many as you can before they know you're here!"

Webb radioed Elliott of his discovery and turned toward the enemy. 'I had not been detected so far, so I decided not to gain altitude, but to just slide into their traffic pattern and get as many as I could before I was detected'. As he started to slide in, he picked up his microphone and made a blanket broadcast. 'Any American fighter near Orote Peninsula. I have 40 Jap planes surrounded and need a little help. Hey Rube!'

Dropping the microphone, Webb was less than 20 yards behind the first group of three Aichi D3A 'Val' dive-bombers. 'All I did was enter the traffic circle at Orote field and slip in behind a division of three. When I started overrunning them I lowered my landing gear and flaps. I fired on the port aeroplane first from "six o'clock" level. It burned. Then I shifted to the centre one and did the same thing, and it burned. By the time I eased in behind the third aeroplane my speed had built up and I started overrunning it. The rear-seat gunner was firing directly at me, but he did not hit my aircraft. I was holding down the trigger, but this aeroplane did not seem to want to burn. I kept saying, "Burn, you bastard", over and over until it finally did explode. If it had not exploded I would have collided with it, I guess. When the "Val" did explode, I flew through the explosion and sustained several holes in my F6F from pieces of it'.

After downing the first three, Webb 'whipped around over the airfield and got in behind another division of three "Vals". The rear-seat gunner of this aircraft was firing directly at me from no farther than 30 yards. I could see the colours of his flightsuit, helmet and skin. Then he seemed to kind of give up. He put his hands up before his face – maybe he thought I was going to run into him – just before several 0.50-in "slugs" hit him in the chest and face. The aircraft started burning, and the pilot bailed out over the side. Although his 'chute opened, we were at no more than 200 ft, so I doubt if he made it.'

The lead "Val" of this flight got away, but Webb managed to get behind the one on the right. 'When I fired, it started shedding pieces and smoking badly. Then his tail disintegrated, and he just fell'.

While the air battle was raging, considerable AA fire was coming up from around Orote Peninsula. 'I could see tracers continually coming up in front of me', Webb recalled. 'I guess they had never seen an F6F Hellcat flying so slow. At the time I did not realise that my aeroplane had been hit'.

By this point in the fight, aircraft were all over the sky. Several other American fighters had arrived by then too. 'No matter where I looked, I could see either a parachute or a burning aeroplane', Webb continued 'It seemed like a mad flying circus, only this was real'.

After the fifth 'Val' had fallen Webb's guns stopped firing. Pulling out, he pushed the gun chargers until he had one gun in each wing working, then headed back into the fight. 'Almost immediately I saw a "Val" coming toward me from

'Spider' Webb's victims on 19 June 1944 were D3A2 'Val' dive-bombers similar to this example, which were highly vulnerable to attack due to their slow speed, lack of self-sealing fuel tanks and poor defensive armament. Five pilots from CAG-2 (three from VF-2 and two from VF(N)-76, who were flying aircraft borrowed from 'Fighting Two') claimed 19 'Vals' destroyed near Orote airfield on 19 June (via Sam Tagaya)





The shattered remains of a 'Val' sit inverted on the waterline at Agat beachhead, near Orote Peninsula. This aircraft was photographed shortly after the Southern Landing Force had invaded Guam on 21 July 1944. The landings were unopposed from the air, so this aircraft must have been one of the 19 claimed by VF-2 on 19 June (US Navy)

above. It was at about 1000 ft. I got it in my sights and squeezed the trigger. As my guns fired, a third gun started working. This "Val" seemed to explode in half just behind the pilot, who bailed out'.

Webb's guns quit a second time. 'Again I headed out of the fight until I managed to get two on one side and one on the other working. Then I headed back in again. I saw another "Val" low on the water, so I

nosed over to intercept it and started firing. I killed the rear-seat man, and the aeroplane started smoking. We were heading toward the cliff edge of Orote Peninsula. I had to pull up to avoid the cliff, so I did not see whether this aeroplane crashed or not'.

Webb's guns quit a third time, forcing him to turn out of the fight until he managed to again get one working. 'At that moment, I spotted one of our Hellcats, which was only about 200 ft over the water, with a Zero-sen on its tail. The Hellcat was in a bad way. I had only one gun working, but I managed to shoot a few pieces off the Zero and run him off of the Hellcat, which, it turned out, was flown by Lt(jg) Bill Levering, a nightfighter pilot from my ship'.

Webb stayed in the fight, despite only having one operable gun. 'I fired at many more "Val" dive-bombers and Zero fighters. I knocked pieces from some and caused others to burn, but none of them was seen to crash. When all my guns became permanently inoperative, I headed out of the fight and toward the open sea'. Webb then realised his canopy was shot up and that there were several holes in the wings both from ground fire and the 'Val' that exploded. 'My goggles were gone, my radio was out, the cylinder head temperature was high and oil was all over my cowlings and windshield. I found out later that there were more than 100 holes in my aircraft. I was beginning to wonder how – or if – I was going to get back to my carrier when a "Fighting Two" Hellcat joined up on me. I quickly gave him the lead and, by hand code, told him to lead me home. The pilot was Ens Jack Vaughan, and I was never happier to see anyone than I was to see him at that time'.

By the time Webb trapped back aboard *Hornet*, his section leader, Lt(jg) Elliott, had already returned and made his official report. 'My gun-camera pictures confirmed four of my victories before the camera jammed', Webb explained. 'For this action, I was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor by Adm Mitscher, but I was awarded the Navy Cross instead'. Eventually, 'Spider' Webb was credited with six 'Vals' destroyed and two probably destroyed in the fight over Orote Peninsula. On 22 September 1944, he destroyed a Japanese Army Air Force (JAAF) Ki-61 'Tony' fighter over Corregidor, in Manila Bay, taking his final tally to seven aerial victories and two probables during his tour with 'Fighting Two'. He was also credited with the single-handed destruction of a 500-ton cargo ship.

THE 'FLYING CHIEFS'

The development of carrier aviation ranks with the introduction of the cannon, steam power and the armoured ironclad in revolutionising the way in which war is waged at sea. While the Royal Navy was the first to embark aircraft aboard its ships, the contest between the US Navy and the IJN in World War 2 was a battle between the two leading exponents of decisive carrier warfare, who had planned and trained for just such a conflict for 20 years.

Aircraft carriers had seen action during World War 1, but they only began to be viewed by the leading navies as important following the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 that limited the size and number of dreadnought battleships nations would be allowed to build and operate. Carriers were originally seen as auxiliary warships that could provide increased scouting and observation ability for the battle line. As they gained experience operating their first carriers, both the US and Japanese navies came to realise that these vessels could in fact play a decisive role in the outcome of the great naval battle that each foresaw themselves fighting against the other during the two decades before the expected war actually occurred.

VF-2 was intimately involved in these developments throughout the interwar years. The unit can trace its ancestry to the earliest days of the development of naval aviation following the end of World War 1. Between 1921 and 1945, three separate units held the designation VF-2. While the US Navy does not officially recognise a direct lineage with disestablished squadrons if a new unit is formed with the same designation, the new squadron will frequently assume the nickname, insignia and traditions of the earlier outfit.

The first VF-2 was established originally as Combat Squadron Four on 23 September 1921. The unit was then based at NAS San Diego, California, which was near the coastal town of Coronado, south of the US Army Air Service (USAAS) airfield at North Island. On 1 July 1922 the squadron was re-designated VF-2 and moved to North Island airfield when it became a Naval Air Station following the departure of the USAAS. At this time the squadron was flying the Vought VE-7 biplane, which was the first aeroplane to be embarked in

The Vought VE-7S was the first aircraft used by VF-2 following its establishment in July 1922 after the re-designation of Combat Squadron Four. Based at North Island airfield (then under the control of the USAAS), 'Fighting Two' made history by routinely operating its VE-7Ss from the US Navy's first aircraft carrier, USS Langley (CV-1), during the early 1920s (US Navy)





The Curtiss F6C-1 Hawk was a navalised version of the USAAC's P-1 Hawk, the aircraft being the last US Navy fighter to be powered by a liquid-cooled engine. F6C-1s served with VF-2B in 1926-27. This particular aircraft, BuNo A6972, was later converted into an F6C-2 (US Navy via Thomas Doll)

and takeoff. An individual aircraft was brought up from the hangar when it was ready for takeoff, and immediately struck below again upon landing so as to make room for the next aeroplane. It was soon realised that this cycle of operations had to be accelerated in order to avoid the carrier being caught unable to defend itself when attacked by an opposing 'flattop'.

Strategists from both the IJN and US Navy studied the experience of the Royal Navy. Initially, the US Navy operated *Langley* the same way that the British employed their second carrier, HMS *Eagle*. With only one elevator, operations were slow, and *Langley* could only oversee the launch and recovery of six aircraft when the flightdeck was active. This changed in 1925 when Capt Joseph M Reeves took command of Aircraft Squadrons, Battle Fleet.

The US Navy's leading authority on battleship gunnery, Reeves had just served two tours at the Naval War College – one as a student and the second as head of the Tactics Department. Reeves was almost as radical a thinker as the US Army's Gen Billy Mitchell, although more restrained in his public statements. He believed it was critical to secure command of the air in any future engagement involving the Battle Fleet, and was shocked by the slowness of *Langley's* operations. He pushed the aviators to find ways to speed up landings and takeoffs – what is known today as cyclical operations – to put as many aircraft as possible into the air and recover them quickly. Under Reeves' leadership, flightdeck 'spotting' (parking), crash barriers, specialised teams of flightdeck personnel identified by different-coloured jerseys and most operational techniques that can be seen in practice daily aboard today's supercarriers were developed. By February 1926 *Langley* was capable of launching and recovering 16 aeroplanes during routine operations, and this number had increased to 22 one year later.

As the fighter squadron assigned to *Langley*, 'Fighting Two' attracted the cream of graduates from Pensacola. There was, however, a problem – officers served in individual assignments for only two to three years before being posted elsewhere within the US Navy. To maintain momentum in operational development, Reeves needed to keep an experienced, long-term personnel base in his squadrons. The problem was resolved in September 1925 when President Calvin Coolidge appointed the Morrow Board to study the needs and problems of aviation in general. One of the board's recommendations was that the US Navy should increase the use of enlisted men as pilots so as to reduce the demand for

USS *Langley* (CV-1), the US Navy's first aircraft carrier.

During the next four years 'Fighting Two' would be intimately involved in the development of operational policies and procedures for aircraft carriers. The main problem associated with operating such a vessel at that time was having sufficient aircraft available to do the job. In 1922, carrier operations were slow since they required a completely clear deck for landing

the limited number of officers. In 1926 the US Congress passed legislation adopting a fixed ratio of 30 percent of pilot strength as enlisted pilots, which constituted a significant increase in the ranks of Naval Aviation Pilots (NAPs), the designation of enlisted aviators in the US Navy.

Keen to employ these additional pilots to its best advantage, the Navy Department decided to organise a specific enlisted man's squadron. On 4 January 1927 the unit was organised as a fighter squadron, with six sections of three pilots each. Each section was led by an officer, with two enlisted pilots as wingmen. Lt Cdr J M Shoemaker was the first commanding officer of the newly-organised unit, which took the designation 'Fighting Two', while the previous VF-2 became 'Fighting Six'.

NAPs would serve throughout the US Navy, but the new 'Fighting Two' would be the only squadron primarily manned by enlisted pilots, and was thus established as an elite unit. While other squadrons also included lower-ranking NAPs, requirements for assignment to VF-2 included 1000 flying hours and successful promotion to chief petty officer. The officers who would rotate through the squadron were also outstanding pilots, many of whom would go on to become distinguished combat leaders in World War 2. To recognise the fact that the squadron was composed primarily of enlisted pilots, the insignia of a chief petty officer over a shield bearing the word *Adorimini* was adopted as the unit emblem. The squadron became known as the 'Flying Chiefs'.

In 1927 the US Navy's carrier fleet tripled in size with the completion of USS *Lexington* (CV-2) and USS *Saratoga* (CV-3). These were large ships of 33,000 tons each that had originally been designed as battlecruisers. Under the Washington Naval Treaty, their class of vessel had been scrapped. However, since both ships were at an advanced stage of construction, they were allowed to be completed as aircraft carriers under the treaty. Japan was also allowed to convert two partially constructed battlecruisers into the carriers *Akagi* and *Kaga*, as was the Royal Navy with *Glorious* and *Courageous*. *Lexington* entered service in 1928, a month after *Saratoga*. These two ships would revolutionise naval aviation, establishing the doctrine that would win the Pacific War.

In 1928, still flying from *Langley* but now equipped with the Curtiss F6C-4 Hawk, a naval development of the US Army Air Corps' P-1 pursuit



In 1927 the US Navy decided to standardise on air-cooled radial engines for all fleet aircraft due to their increased reliability over liquid-cooled designs. Curtiss duly adapted its F6C series accordingly, fitting the fighters with 410 hp Pratt & Whitney R-1300 Hornet radials. VF-2B was equipped with 19 F6C-4s for little more than a year in 1928-29, only briefly embarking in *Langley* during that period (US Navy via Thomas Doll)



In 1929 VF-2B traded in its F6C-4 Hawks for worn-out Boeing F2B-2s that had previously been flown by VF-1, the unit making two cruises in *Langley* with the biplane fighters in 1930-31. Note the 'Flying Chiefs' rank emblem beneath the cockpit of this machine – a unit marking proudly worn by all 'Fighting Two' aircraft for much of the inter-war period (US Navy via Thomas Doll)

aircraft, and under the command of Lt Cdr G F Chapline, VF-2B (the B identified the unit as being part of the Battle Force) demonstrated the power of dive-bombing when it carried out mock-attacks on Pacific Fleet ships. Commanders of the surface vessels had expected standard, low-altitude, level bombing, and they were unpleasantly surprised when the VF-2B Hawks attacked, unseen, from 12,000 ft, making simulated drops before the ship's defences could be manned.

The early years of the 'Flying Chiefs' were later recalled by George F Ocskay, who served with the unit throughout the 1930s;

'In 1929 the squadron was embarked in USS *Langley*, and it made the vessel's annual cruise. We delivered nine Curtiss Hawks to Pensacola and brought ten back to San Diego – we had only one spare in those days. After we arrived in San Diego, we turned in the other ten and received "Fighting One's" worn-out Boeing F2Bs. They were wonderful stunt ships, but not as rugged as the Hawks. The squadron made the 1930 and 1931 cruises on *Langley* with these F2Bs, and only lost one. We left 18 F2Bs on the field at Guantanamo Bay after "Fighting Two" was transferred to *Lexington*, which, at about the same time, received sailing orders to proceed at full speed for the scene of the earthquake in Nicaragua.

'After returning to San Diego in 1932, we received "Fighting Three's" worn out F3Bs, which were supposed to be good high-altitude ships. Those F3Bs were the best gunnery ships and dive-bombers we ever had, and the squadron really knocked out the gunnery score that year. That was the year I was lucky enough to get 60 hits out of 60 rounds of ammunition and four-out-of-four in bomb hits with drops on a 45 x 90 ft target. Only the 45-ft square centre counted as a full hit, and umpires flying around the target at 1500 ft made sure you were out of the dive at that altitude.

'The squadron was good because everyone in it was hand picked. Most of the pilots had 1000 hours or more when they were transferred in.



I only had about 700 or 800, so I was allowed in with the understanding that if I did not work out, I would not remain with them. I served nine years in the squadron, and in that period I broke one wheel on the carrier and forgot to let my wheels down on another occasion after we transitioned to the F2F.'

VF-2's proficiency in dive-bombing led to the creation of the scout-bomber, an aeroplane capable of both finding and striking enemy carriers. The result of this development would be the SBD Dauntless, the aeroplane that won the carrier battles of 1942.

Throughout the 1930s, 'Fighting Two' and 'Fighting Six', the squadron whose designation VF-2 had taken, would compete closely. The latter unit had become 'Fighting Three' when it was sent to *Saratoga* as its fighter squadron. The two would interact closely over the next 12 years as their carriers developed the doctrine that would eventually win a war.

In February 1931, for example, during Fleet Problem XII, *Lexington* – under the command of Capt Ernest J King, who would rise to Chief of Naval Operations during World War 2 – and *Saratoga* were charged with defending the west coast of Panama against a hypothetical invader. While each carrier inflicted some damage on the invasion convoys, the enemy forces succeeded in landing troops. A month later, *Lexington*, *Saratoga* and *Langley* transferred to the Caribbean to conduct further manoeuvres. The most important of these saw *Saratoga* successfully defend the Caribbean side of the Panama Canal from an attack by *Lexington* when task force commander Rear Admiral Joseph M Reeves baited a trap for CV-2 with a destroyer and duly scored a 'kill' on 22 March while *Lexington's* aircraft were still searching for *Saratoga*. This established the two main principles of carrier warfare – the primary role of the carrier was finding and sinking the enemy carrier, and that the carrier that struck first would be the victor.

During Grand Joint Exercise No 4, held in early 1932, *Lexington* and *Saratoga* combined forces to launch a massive air strike against Pearl Harbor on Sunday, 7 February, without being detected. During Fleet Problem XIII the following month, *Lexington* was assigned to 'Black

Officers and men of VF-2 'Flying Chiefs' at North Island in 1932. The unit's Commanding Officer, Lt H M Miller, is seated in the middle of the second row. He led the unit from 1932 to 1934, and like many of the outstanding officers assigned to lead 'Fighting Two', he later rose to flag rank (rear admiral) during World War 2. His Executive Officer and the four Section Leaders are seated either side of him in their khaki uniforms. The Chief NAPs are seated in the front and second rows in dress blues, with groundcrewmen in the third and fourth rows (US Navy)

Fleet', tasked with defending Hawaii and the US West Coast against 'Blue Fleet' and *Saratoga*. On 15 March, *Lexington's* Carrier Air Group (CAG) 2 caught *Saratoga* with all of its aeroplanes still on deck. The attack was deemed to have knocked out the vessel's flightdeck and to have badly damaged the ship, which was ruled sunk that night during an attack by 'Black Fleet' destroyers. CAG-2 was also judged to have badly damaged two of 'Blue Fleet's' battleships through dive-bombing. The two principles of carrier warfare had been driven home again, and the dive-bomber was emerging as Naval Aviation's decisive weapon of war.

In January 1933, before the commencement of Fleet Problem XIV, the US Army and US Navy conducted a joint exercise simulating a carrier attack on Hawaii. *Lexington* and *Saratoga* were again successful in launching a combined strike against Pearl Harbor at dawn on 31 January 1933 without being detected.

As the premier fighter squadron of the US Navy, 'Fighting Two' was equipped with the Boeing F4B-4 when it entered service in 1934, flying this supremely manoeuvrable fighter until 1936. In 1935, a young ensign who had recently graduated from Pensacola at the top of his class reported to the squadron to take over the fifth section. Richard H Best Jr would join the ranks of legendary Naval Aviators in 1942 as the commander of 'Bombing Six' aboard USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) at the Battle of Midway, where he would turn the tide of battle from American defeat to American victory by sinking the Japanese carrier *Akagi* on 4 June. A few hours later he would seal that victory by helping to sink the carrier *Hiryu*. Best recalled in a 1998 interview that his days with the 'Flying Chiefs' were among his happiest;

'The little Boeing F4B-4 wasn't really much of a fighter compared to what we knew was going on at the time in Europe. It was slow, short-ranged, under-armed and mostly obsolete, but it was a pure joy to fly. It was so responsive that all you had to do as the pilot was stick your arm out one side or the other of the open cockpit and that would initiate a turn.'

During Fleet Problem XVI, which was conducted between April-June 1935, *Lexington* ran low on fuel after five days of high-speed steaming, which led to experiments later that year with underway replenishment.

Being the US Navy's premier fighter squadron, 'Fighting Two' was equipped with the Boeing F4B-4 when it entered fleet service in 1934. The unit flew this supremely manoeuvrable fighter until 1936. This particular aircraft (BuNo A8914) was flown by the Fourth Section Leader (US Navy via Thomas Doll)





This successful development would later prove essential to combat operations in the Pacific War. During Fleet Problem XVII in 1936, *Lexington* and USS *Ranger* (CV-4) routinely refuelled their plane guard destroyers. During this period the 'Flying Chiefs' took delivery of the first single-seat fighter created by the Grumman Aircraft Corporation, the F2F-1. While not much bigger than the F4B-4, it was faster and equally as manoeuvrable. The aeroplane also featured an enclosed cockpit with a sliding canopy and a retractable landing gear. The 'Chiefs' would operate this aeroplane longer than any other, with examples being on strength until 1940.

In June 1937 VF-2 welcomed a new commanding officer, Lt Cdr Apollo Soucek. A Naval Aviator with 13 years of experience, Soucek had first served aboard *Langley* with its scouting squadron. By 1927 he had demonstrated his superior skill as an aviator and been transferred to the Bureau of Aeronautics as a test pilot, where he participated in the development of engines and aircraft capable of high-altitude flight. Flying the Wright XF3W Apache, Soucek proceeded to set a series of altitude records. On 8 May 1929 he increased the world record for land aeroplanes to 39,140 ft. On 4 June, flying a float-equipped Apache, he set the altitude record for seaplanes by reaching 38,560 ft. A year later, on 4 June 1930, he flew an Apache powered by a 450 hp Pratt & Whitney R-1340 to 43,166 ft over NAS Anacostia, in Washington, D.C., regaining the world record he had set in 1929.

By the time Soucek came to 'Fighting Two' he had held several positions within the squadron's fleet rival, 'Fighting Three', and had definite ideas on how to develop a high altitude fighting capability in the US Navy.

Dick Best recalled that Soucek trained the pilots of his squadron in the use of oxygen equipment, which was new to the US Navy, and worked to develop the skills necessary to maintain formation and fight at high altitude. 'Flying in formation at 28,000 ft, which was about the absolute best we could do with the F2F since it only had a single-stage supercharger, was

VF-2 was equipped with the Grumman F2F-1 between 1936 and 1940. Featuring an enclosed cockpit and a retractable undercarriage, the fighter was almost 80 mph faster than the F4B-4 it replaced, and just as manoeuvrable. The latter trait allowed VF-2's 'Fighting Chiefs' to perfect the 'crazy formation' routine, as seen in this photograph, taken over southern California, in which the section leader maintained straight and level flight while aircraft No 2 was in a right slip and aircraft No 3 in a left slip. Only the extreme skill of the veteran NAPs allowed this formation to be flown in up to squadron strength (US Navy via Thomas Doll)

USS *Lexington* (CV-2) was home to VF-2 for a decade from 1932, the bond between the unit and the US Navy's second carrier only being broken in May 1942 when 'Lady Lex' was sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea. This photograph was taken in 1938, when CAG-2 and CV-2 were kept busy 'attacking' Pearl Harbor (Fleet Problem XIX) and San Francisco in conjunction with USS *Saratoga* (CV-3). Although *Lexington's* flightdeck is overcrowded with Vought SBU scout-bomber biplanes of VS-2B and Douglas TBD torpedo-bombers of VT-2B, only one solitary F2F from 'Fighting Two' can be seen parked on the bow amongst myriad scout-bombers. Perhaps the rest of the Grumman fighters were 'choked and chained' in the hangar bay? (US Navy)



considerably different from doing that at 12,000-15,000 ft, which is what we had been used to', Best recalled. 'We learned to think ahead about what we were doing since the aeroplanes were right at the upper edge of their performance envelope. It took awhile, but by the time Soucek left a year later we had the ability to intercept and destroy any enemy high-altitude snooper'. This knowledge would spread throughout the US Navy in the years before the outbreak of war, providing a necessary skill that would prove critical in the conflict to come. Soucek would later be an important member of Adm Chester Nimitz's staff during the creation of the fast carrier strike force that helped the Allies achieve victory in the Pacific.

In 1937's Fleet Problem XVIII, *Lexington* was assigned to support the battleships rather than operate independently, with the result that the ship was judged crippled and nearly sunk by surface gunfire and torpedoes. The principle that the carrier must operate with its own task force had been clearly demonstrated.

Lexington and *Saratoga* again successfully attacked Pearl Harbor at dawn on 29 March 1938 as part of Fleet Problem XIX. One has to wonder, with the carriers having demonstrated in 1932, 1933 and 1938 that Pearl Harbor (the main American base in the Pacific) was vulnerable to seaborne aerial attack, why measures were not taken to provide a suitable defence against such an event? Three-and-a-half years later, the IJNAF would devastate the US Navy with an attack American Naval Aviators had themselves shown was feasible on three separate occasions. In April 1938 *Lexington* and *Saratoga* successfully 'attacked' San Francisco without being spotted by the defending fleet, demonstrating the strategic role of the aircraft carrier. This would reach its zenith in 1945 when Allied fast carriers attacked the Japanese home islands.

A preview of the operation of the fast carrier task force that would dominate the Pacific War was provided in Fleet Problem XX, held in the Caribbean in March-April 1939. *Lexington* and *Ranger*, with the new carriers *Enterprise* and USS *Yorktown* (CV-5), operated together successfully, demonstrating on repeated occasions that such vessels could be refuelled at sea in order to extend their range and duration of operation. Shortly thereafter *Lexington* went into the Bremerton Navy Yard for modernisation. This would include widening the forward part of the flightdeck so that two aircraft could take off simultaneously and increasing the ship's AA armament.

While their ship was absent 'Fighting Two' operated from *Saratoga* alongside 'Fighting Three', which that autumn became the first US Navy fighter squadron to receive the service's new monoplane fighter, the Brewster F2A-1. The 'Fighting Chiefs' finally replaced their ageing F2F-1s with F2A-2s in 1940, just in time to participate in Fleet Problem XXI. The latter demonstrated just how fast and bloody carrier warfare could be when *Lexington's* CAG-2 caught *Yorktown* by surprise and

'crippled' it, while *Yorktown's* CAG-5 (already airborne at the time of the attack) managed to knock out *Lexington's* flightdeck near simultaneously.

Throughout the 1930s there was one activity that differentiated US Navy fighter squadrons from their US Army counterparts – the emphasis Naval Aviation placed on accurate gunnery. While USAAC units paid almost no attention to gunnery, most US Navy fighter squadrons devoted the majority of their flight training to perfecting the art of aerial shooting. With the 'Flying Chiefs' this was especially important, resulting in a handful of pilots, including George Ocskay, scoring 100 percent in their gunnery passes. Throughout the interwar years, 'Fighting Two' regularly had squadron members finish in the top ten during the annual fleet-wide gunnery competition.

Shortly after VF-2 re-equipped with the F2A-2, newly promoted Lt Richard Best put in for a transfer to a torpedo-bomber squadron;

'I knew we were going to fight, and I wanted to be sure I got to hit the enemy. Our fighter doctrine then didn't include offensive operations, so I put in for a torpedo-bomber squadron. They were the senior units, and I didn't have the seniority to maintain my position as a senior flight leader, so I took my second choice and got sent to the dive-bomber squadron on *Enterprise*.'

The nation would have cause to be glad Dick Best did not qualify as a torpedo-bomber pilot.

In the autumn of 1941 the 'Flying Chiefs' gave up their once gaily-painted F2A-2s for drab grey F2A-3 fighters. They had already found that the F2A-2 was not robust enough for the vicissitudes of carrier operations, with a notably weak landing gear that frequently collapsed in hard landings. No one liked the Brewster fighter, and they disliked the newer version even more, since it was heavier than its predecessor but still powered by the same Wright R-1820 radial engine, with resulting lower



The 'Flying Chiefs' turned in their F2F-1s in the spring of 1940 to become only the second fleet fighter squadron after VF-3 to operate the Brewster F2A Buffalo, the US Navy's first all-metal monoplane fighter. F2A-2 BuNo 1412, flown by the Third Section Leader, is seen in the summer of 1941 – the last time the colourful pre-war 'Golden Wings' scheme would grace a US Navy fighter. The aircraft has been adorned with the 'Flying Chiefs' marking beneath the cockpit (US Navy via Thomas Doll)



The major failing of the F2A series was its weak landing gear, which was frequently unable to withstand the demands placed on it by Naval Aviators landing aboard carriers. The F2A-2 (BuNo 1415) assigned to VF-2's squadron CO, Lt Cdr Herbert Duckworth, suffered just such a failure during routine operations in the spring of 1941. The US Navy had only recently changed the paint scheme of its carrier-based aircraft from the colourful inter-war markings to overall light grey, with reduced-visibility codes and national insignia, when this accident occurred (US Navy via Thomas Doll)



VF-2's Naval Aviators and maintenance personnel come together for an informal squadron photograph aboard *Lexington* on 19 December 1941. The vessel, part of TF 11, was heading for the Japanese base on Jaluit, in the Marshall Islands, at the time. Amongst 'Fighting Two's' pilot cadre at the time was Lt James Flatley and future ranking US Navy F4F ace NAP Donald Runyon (Cdr Tom Cheek)

performance. George Ocskay recalled that he was sad to leave the squadron at this time, but glad with the darkening clouds of war that he would not have to meet the enemy in an F2A-3.

VF-2 was at sea aboard *Lexington* on 7 December 1941, the carrier being accompanied by three heavy cruisers and five destroyers as part of TF 12. Commanded by Rear Admiral John H Newton, the task force had departed Pearl Harbor on 5 December 1941 after being ordered to ferry 18 US Marine Corps Vought SB2U-3 Vindicator dive-bombers of VMSB-241 to Midway Island as reinforcements. The 65 aircraft of CAG-2 included 17 F2A-3s of VF-2. On the morning of 7 December the task force was 500 nautical miles southeast of Midway when word was received of the Japanese attack. Several hours later the ferry mission was cancelled and TF 12 was ordered to rendezvous with a surface force, commanded by Vice Admiral Wilson Brown, 100 miles west of Niihau Island while conducting aerial searches for the Japanese fleet.

Lexington's flightdeck was crowded with the 65 aircraft from CAG-2, as well as the additional 18 Marine Corps dive-bombers. The vessel's commanding officer, Capt Frederick C Sherman, decided to reverse the phase of the ship's turbo-electric propulsion motors and steam full speed astern in order to launch a new Combat Air Patrol (CAP), then resume forward motion to recover the current CAP. This unorthodox operation allowed *Lexington* to maintain a continuous CAP and recover aircraft without the usual lengthy delay caused by moving aircraft forward and aft on the flightdeck to make space available for launch and recovery operations.

For the next five days CAG-2 searched for the Japanese fleet while the task force remained at sea between Johnston Island and Hawaii, reacting to several false alerts. Difficulty in refuelling the escorting destroyers on 11 and 12 December forced the task force to return to Pearl Harbor on the 13th. The pilots of 'Fighting Two', many of whom had participated in the strikes against Pearl Harbor during the fleet problems over the preceding eight years, looked on in amazement at the scene of devastation before them. They saw the battleship USS *Nevada* (BB-36) beached near the harbour entrance, the oily harbour water lapping at the main decks of the torpedoed battleships USS *West Virginia* (BB-48) and USS *California* (BB-44), the twisted wreckage of the battleship USS *Arizona* (BB-39) and the capsized hull of the USS *Oklahoma* (BB-37), upon which rescue crews still worked to open holes in a desperate attempt to rescue survivors trapped within the vessel. They saw the twisted wrecks of US Navy aircraft and their burned-out hangars at NAS Ford Island.

Individually, many of the officers and sailors of the task force swore personal vengeance on the Japanese, as would thousands of other servicemen in the years to come as they confronted the scene of defeat. For the US Navy, the Pacific War would be personal.

Re-designated TF 11 and reinforced with four additional destroyers, *Lexington* and its escorting cruisers and destroyers departed Pearl Harbor the next day, heading southwest on a mission to raid the Japanese base on Jaluit, in the Marshall Islands. Meanwhile, TF 14, commanded by Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher aboard *Saratoga*, headed west to reinforce distant Wake Island with US Marine Corps fighter squadron VMF-221. CAG-2 embarked 21 F2A-3s of VF-2, 16 SBD-2 Dauntless dive-bombers of VS-2, 16 SBD-2s of VB-2 and 15 TBD-1 Devastators of VT-2.

On 20 December Vice Admiral William S Pye, acting commander of the Pacific Fleet, cancelled the Jaluit attack and ordered TF 11 to turn northwest and cover TF 14 as it neared Wake Island. Naval Intelligence was aware that the Japanese carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shōkaku* had been detached from the Mobile Fleet to cover the Wake invasion following the failure of the first Japanese landing attempt on 11 December. There was concern that a carrier battle could break out at any time. Both American task forces experienced difficulty refuelling destroyers in heavy seas on 21 December, which slowed their progress. With TF 14 now set to arrive at Wake on 23 December, at 2100 hrs on the 22nd Vice Admiral Pye ordered Rear Admiral Fletcher to abandon the relief expedition and instructed both task forces to return to Pearl Harbor because he could not risk his two largest carriers and the majority of the remaining surface capital ships of the Pacific Fleet in such a battle. While returning to Pearl Harbor Fletcher despatched the F2A-3s of VMF-221 to Midway Atoll, from where they would patrol for the next six months before meeting the Japanese in the Battle of Midway.

The men of both task forces were terribly disappointed to receive these orders, especially when less than 24 hours later the Japanese landed on Wake for a second time and forced an American surrender. *Lexington* arrived back in Pearl Harbor on 27 December, but it was ordered to sea again two days later, returning on 3 January 1942 after the breakdown of one of its General Electric main turbo generators.

On 7 January Vice Admiral Wilson Brown relieved Rear Admiral Newton as task force commander. TF 11 departed Pearl Harbor that same day with orders to patrol in the direction of Johnston Atoll. On 9 January the task force was spotted by the Japanese submarine I-18, and on receiving its report, Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, Adm Isoroku Yamamoto, directed that other submarines be sent to the area to intercept the American vessels and sink *Lexington*. That afternoon, two 'Fighting Two' pilots on patrol spotted another submarine, likely I-19, as it was submerging. It was seen again a short while later by two more VF-2 pilots, and two TBD-1s with depth charges were vectored to the position. They duly attacked I-19 and claimed to have damaged it before the submarine could fully submerge. However, I-19 arrived unscathed at Kwajalein on 15 January. The task force returned to Pearl Harbor without further incident on 10 January.

The next day *Saratoga* was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine I-6 while heading for a rendezvous with the *Enterprise* task group. The explosion flooded three of its boiler rooms and reduced the carrier's speed

A camouflaged F2A-3 is offloaded at Pearl Harbor in early February 1942 after being shipped to Hawaii from the USA aboard the aircraft transport USS *Kitty Hawk* (APV-1). By then VF-2 had just started its conversion to the F4F-3A at NAS Kaneohe Bay, receiving aircraft previously flown by VMF-111. Its 16 operational Brewster fighters would in turn be passed on to Marine Air Group 21 (US Navy)



to 16 knots. It arrived back at Pearl Harbor on 13 January. As *Saratoga* limped into port, *Lexington* departed for another patrol, north of Christmas Island.

On 21 January 1942, Adm Chester Nimitz ordered TF 11 to conduct a diversionary raid on Wake Island on the 27th. The elderly and slow oiler USS *Neches* (AO-5) was sent unescorted to refuel the force, but it was torpedoed and sunk by I-72 on 23 January. With the raid cancelled, *Lexington* returned to Pearl Harbor on 25 January.

The F2A-3s of 'Fighting Two' had not stood up well to the increased operations following the outbreak of war, and several had been damaged. *Saratoga*'s 'Fighting Three' had been flying the Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat since 1941, and it had proven itself superior to the F2A-3 in operations. Thus, it was decided that VF-2 would be put ashore to transition to the Wildcat while 'Fighting Three' went aboard *Lexington* for the coming operations. 'Fighting Two' returned to Hawaii, where most of its experienced enlisted pilots transferred out of the squadron. Veteran pilots like newly-promoted Lt(jg) Gordon Firebaugh were too valuable to be kept at sea. As the former 'Flying Chiefs' received commissions and went into Training Command, they would provide instruction for thousands of new pilots who would win the war. The 'Flying Chiefs' were no more.

'RAMSEY'S LAMBSIES'

VF-2 had welcomed Lt Cdr Paul Ramsey as its new commander during the autumn of 1941, and he would now lead its transition from the F2A-3 to the F4F-3A Wildcat (the latter being transferred to the unit by VMF-111) once the squadron had returned to Hawaii in late January 1942. With the majority of the experienced enlisted pilots having been commissioned and transferred to other units, Ramsey was left with a small core of veteran pilots and the job of integrating new Naval Aviators into the squadron as it transitioned to the Wildcat, initially at NAS Kaneohe and then at nearby MCAS Ewa. By late March 'Fighting Two' (equipped with nine F4F-3As, eight F4F-3s and eight F4F-4s – the first 'Dash Fours' to reach Hawaii) was declared ready to return to operations.

In the meantime *Lexington* had taken part in several other operations, with 'Fighting Three' as its fighter squadron. During an attempted raid against Rabaul the ship had been detected by the Japanese. Lt Edward H 'Butch' O'Hare and his wingman Lt(jg) Marion W Dufilho intercepted a group of seven Mitsubishi G4M1 'Betty' bombers and shot all of them down before they could attack the task force. O'Hare was credited with destroying five aircraft to become the US Navy's first ace of the Pacific War, his outstanding success resulting in him receiving the Medal of Honor.

In March aircraft from *Lexington* and *Yorktown* struck Lae and Salamaua, on the northern coast of New Guinea. The carriers launched their attack from a position south of the island, with the strike force crossing the Owen Stanley Mountains to surprise the Japanese. *Lexington* returned to Pearl Harbor on 26 March and went into the yard for a brief refit, during which time its four eight-inch gun turrets were removed and additional AA weapons were installed. While the carrier was refitting, events were moving at an even faster pace towards a climax in the South Pacific.

In early March US Naval Communications Intelligence became aware of a Japanese plan, codenamed Operation *Mo*, to take control of the southern Solomon Islands, with the establishment of a seaplane base at Tulagi followed by a seaborne invasion of Port Moresby, the main Allied base in New Guinea.

VF-2's CO during the early stages of the Pacific War was veteran Naval Aviator Lt Cdr Paul Ramsey (seen here posing with a TBF-1 after he had become CO of CAG-14 in 1943). A highly competent and well respected leader, he claimed two 'Type 00 VF' fighters (Zero-sens) during the confused air battle at dusk on 7 May 1942 and then led the VF-2 CAP defending TF 17 against strikes by aircraft from *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku* the following day – he was credited with an 'Me 109' destroyed and a second as a probable on 8 May (US Navy)





VF-2 spent more than three months ashore transitioning from the Buffalo to the Wildcat. The unit received 11 F4F-3As (fitted with Pratt & Whitney R-1830-90 engines) from VMF-111 on 26 January 1942, followed by more F4F-3s (powered by Pratt & Whitney R-1830-76s) and the first F4F-4s (with folding wings and two extra machine guns) to reach Hawaii (US Navy)

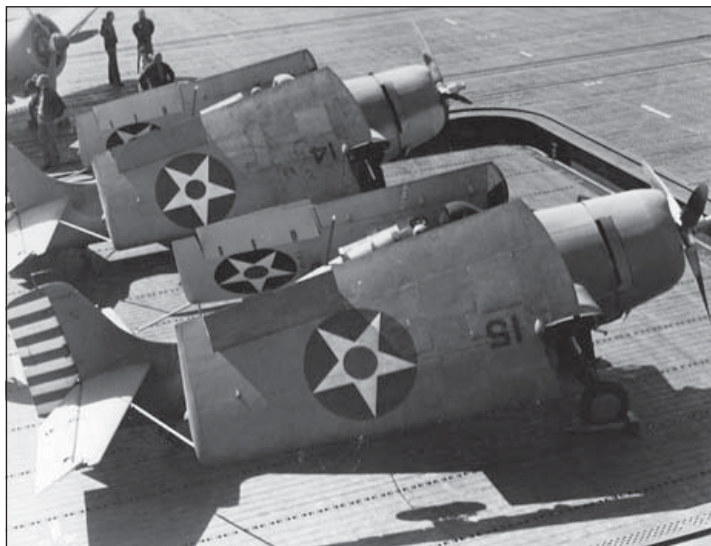
Tulagi would be taken on 2-3 May, with the Port Moresby invasion to follow one week later. Further operations against Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia were planned for the summer.

Establishing a base in the Solomons would provide the Japanese with the ability to block Allied shipping heading to Australia. Following the Lae-Salamaua strike, Vice Admiral Shigeyoshi Inoue, commander of the Fourth Fleet, requested that the Combined Fleet send carriers to provide air cover for the Port Moresby invasion. On 5 April 1942 an order was intercepted directing the Mobile Fleet to detach a carrier division to proceed to the South Pacific. Eight days later the British deciphered a message informing Vice Admiral Inoue that the Fifth Carrier Division, consisting of the fleet carriers *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku*, was en route from Formosa via the main Japanese base at Truk. The British passed the message on to the Americans, along with their conclusion that Port Moresby was the likely target of Operation *Mo*. Adm Nimitz prepared a response.

Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch assumed command of TF 11 on 1 April, his force consisting of *Lexington*, the heavy cruisers USS *Minneapolis* (CA-36) and USS *New Orleans* (CA-32) and seven destroyers. The newly returned 'Fighting Two' was ordered back aboard CV-2 on 15 April.

Since VF-2 lacked pilots with combat experience, the squadron was 'fleshed out' with combat veterans from 'Fighting Three'. They were transferred in on 12 April when unit strength was increased from 18 to 27 Wildcats. Lt Albert O Vorse became the second division leader, with Ens Edward L Sellstrom as his wingman, and Lt(jg) Robert J Morgan as element lead and Ens John H Lackett as his wingman. Lt(jg) Marion W Dufilho, who had been O'Hare's wingman in the epic fight against the bombers off Rabaul, where he had shot down two 'Bettys' himself, took over the third division, with Ens Newton H Mason as his wingman. Lt Noel A M Gayler, who had scored three victories with 'Fighting Three', became the fourth division leader, with Lt(jg) Howard F Clark as element lead and Ens Richard H Rowell as wingman. Finally, Ens Willard E 'Bill' Eder and Leon W Haynes joined the fifth division. The task force sailed from Pearl Harbor on 15 April.

Two weeks later Nimitz ordered his four carriers and their supporting warships into the Coral Sea. While *Lexington's* TF 11 headed south, TF 17, under the command of Rear Admiral Fletcher aboard *Yorktown*, was already in the Coral Sea. TF 16, composed of *Enterprise* and *Hornet*,



The great advantage of the F4F-4 variant over the 'Dash Three' is clearly demonstrated in this photograph taken in early 1942 – folding wings. This meant that US Navy fleet carriers could carry more fighters, which in turn allowed fighter squadrons to boost their complement of Wildcats from 18 to 36 aircraft. Two F4F-4s could now fit on the elevator of an aircraft carrier that could only previously have taken one F4F-3 (US Navy)

had just returned to Pearl Harbor from the Doolittle Raid and would not reach the Coral Sea in time to participate in the battle.

Having intercepted radio traffic from TF 16, the Japanese believed that all but one of the American carriers were in the central Pacific. They did not expect a response from the vessels to *Mo* until the operation was well underway. The Carrier Strike Force, centred around *Zuikaku* and *Shōkaku*, with two heavy cruisers and six destroyers as escorts, sortied from Truk on 1 May under the command of Vice Admiral Takeo Takagi, aboard the cruiser *Myoko* – Rear Admiral Chuichi Hara aboard *Zuikaku* was in tactical command of the carrier air forces. In the meantime, the Tulagi Invasion Force headed for the southern Solomons. Supporting this force was the Covering Group (consisting of the light carrier *Shoho*, four heavy cruisers and one destroyer) commanded by Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto.

Following their departure from Pearl Harbor, the pilots of VF-2, now known as 'Ramsey's Lambsies', trained hard. The former 'Fighting Three' pilots were experienced in the use of the new 'Thach Weave' manoeuvre developed by their former commander, which gave the lower-performing Wildcat a tactical advantage when confronting the more agile Mitsubishi A6M Zero-sen. The inexperienced pilots of the squadron worked with the veterans to learn the manoeuvre, which called for a section of two aeroplanes to turn toward each other when attacked. This would place each Wildcat in a position to meet a Zero-sen head-on during its firing pass from the rear, hopefully throwing the Japanese pilot off his plan of attack, while giving his American counterparts the chance to bring the four heavy machine guns in their F4Fs to bear on the lightly-constructed IJNAF fighter.

On the morning of 1 May, TFs 11 and 17 rendezvoused 300 nautical miles northwest of New Caledonia. Rear Admiral Fletcher immediately detached *Lexington's* force to refuel from the oiler USS *Tippecanoe* (AO-21), while *Yorktown's* force refuelled from USS *Neosho* (AO-23). TF 17 completed refuelling on 2 May, but TF 11 reported it would not be finished until the 4th. Fletcher took *Yorktown* towards the Louisiade Archipelago and ordered Fitch to meet TF 44 on 4 May. The latter was a joint Australian-US force led by the Royal Australian Navy's Rear Admiral John Crace that consisted of the

cruisers HMAS *Australia* and HMAS *Hobart* and USS *Chicago* (CA-29), as well as three destroyers, which was en route from Sydney and Nouméa.

The Japanese arrived off Tulagi before dawn on 3 May and landed without opposition, the small garrison of Australian commandos and a Royal Australian Air Force reconnaissance unit having been evacuated just hours earlier. Aircraft from *Shoho* covered the landings through to the early afternoon, when the vessels turned toward Bougainville to refuel in preparation for the landings at Port Moresby.

Rear Admiral Fletcher learned of the invasion at 1700 hrs on 3 May. Unaware that TF 11 had actually completed its refuelling that morning and was only 60 nautical miles east of him, he turned north towards Guadalcanal and prepared to launch air strikes the following morning. Arriving 100 miles south of Guadalcanal on the 4th, *Yorktown* launched 60 aircraft in three consecutive strikes against Tulagi, losing one dive-bomber and two fighters. Their crews duly became the first Americans to arrive on Guadalcanal, where they quickly established contact with coast watchers and were eventually rescued.

The Carrier Striking Force was refuelling 350 miles north of Tulagi when word was received of the American attack. Knowing now that US carriers were indeed in the Coral Sea, Takagi terminated refuelling and headed southeast at full speed. On 5 May he launched scouts well ahead of the carriers to search for the enemy fleet east of the Solomons.

The following day TFs 11 and 44 joined TF 17. SBD Dauntless scouting patrols were launched throughout the day, but they failed to locate any of the Japanese naval forces due to them being just beyond the range of the aircraft.

At 1000 hrs on 6 May a Kawanishi H6K 'Mavis' flying boat from Tulagi sighted the American vessels, Vice Admiral Takagi receiving the report 50 minutes later. The Japanese force was 300 miles north, near the maximum range for a strike. Takagi concluded that his quarry was heading south and increasing the range between them. Furthermore, the American ships were under a heavy overcast, which Takagi believed would make it difficult for his fliers to find their targets. The two carriers headed toward the American fleet so as to be in a position to attack at dawn the following morning.

A fixed wing, four-gun F4F-3A is rearmed on the flightdeck – although this aircraft is from VF-6, it is representative of the machines that re-equipped VF-2 in early 1942. Note the target tow can beneath its starboard wing. The Browning M-2 machine gun had a rate of fire of between 750-850 rounds per minute. The 'Dash Three' had 450 rounds per weapon, while the F4F-4 had only 240 rounds per gun due to the addition of two extra M-2s – a retrograde step in the eyes of many pilots, who felt that four 0.50-in machine guns were adequate against the vulnerable Zero-sen (US Navy)



6 May had also seen US Navy CAPs vectored on several occasions towards Japanese search aeroplanes. Four Wildcats from *Yorktown*'s VF-42, led by squadron commander Jimmy Flatley, and four fighters from VF-2, led by Lt Noel Gayler, were sent after one shadower, Flatley intercepting the 'Mavis' and reporting it to *Yorktown*. The carrier replied with a request for its position, to which Flatley radioed, 'Wait a minute and I'll show you'. An explosion rent the clouds as he blew up the flying boat. Pieces of the shattered aeroplane tumbled through the clouds, narrowly missing Gayler. 'That almost hit me!' he exclaimed over the radio, to which Flatley replied 'That'll teach you not to fly underneath me'.

The Battle of the Coral Sea commenced on 7 May when *Yorktown* dispatched ten SBDs to search the Louisiades at 0619 hrs. Thirty-six minutes later the Japanese carriers, which were actually located 300 miles east of TF 17, launched 12 Nakajima B5N2 'Kate' bombers to scout for the US ships. Believing them to be located south of their force, the 'Kate' crews flew east of TF 17 and missed sighting them in the poor weather.

At 0722 hrs a Japanese scout aircraft found the oiler *Neosho* and its escort, the destroyer USS *Sims* (DD-409), mistakenly identifying them as aircraft carriers. At 0800 hrs Vice Admiral Takagi launched his full strike force of 78 aircraft from both *Zuikaku* and *Shōkaku* – 18 A6M2 Zero-sen fighters, 36 D4Y1 'Val' dive-bombers and 24 B5N2 'Kate' torpedo-bombers. At 0820, a 'Mavis' from Tulagi found the American carriers and reported the sighting to Vice Admiral Inoue at Rabaul, where it was forwarded to Takagi. The sighting was confirmed by a scout from the cruiser *Kinugasa* at 0830 hrs. Confused by the conflicting sighting reports, Takagi decided to continue the strike on the ships to the south, while turning *Zuikaku* and *Shōkaku* to the northwest to close the distance with *Kinugasa*'s reported contact. At that point Takagi considered the conflicting reports might mean the Americans were operating in two separate groups.

At 0815 hrs SBD pilot Ens John L Nielsen from *Yorktown*'s 'Scouting Five' sighted the Invasion Screening Force, which included the light carrier *Shoho*. Making an error in his coded message, Nielsen reported the sighting as 'two carriers and four heavy cruisers' 225 miles northwest of TF 17. Rear Admiral Fletcher ordered all available aircraft launched to attack. By 1013 hrs a strike force of 93 aircraft was on its way, with the 40 from *Lexington*, including ten Wildcats from 'Fighting Two', led by their CO, Paul Ramsey. The 28 SBDs from 'Bombing Two' and 'Scouting Two' were escorted by four Wildcats led by Lt Fred Borries, with two others as high cover for the CAG, Cdr William B Ault. The 12 TBD Devastators at low altitude were covered by Ramsey's division. Unlike the various elements of *Yorktown*'s strike, which organised themselves en route, *Lexington*'s carrier air group formed up as briefed before heading out.

At 1012 hrs Fletcher received a report from three USAAF B-17s flying from Port Moresby that they had spotted an aircraft carrier, ten transports and 16 warships 30 miles south of Nielsen's sighting – this was actually the same force the SBD pilot had spotted, plus the transports of the Port Moresby Invasion Force. Believing the B-17s had reported the main Japanese carrier force, Fletcher directed the airborne strike force towards this target.

The Japanese strike force had sighted *Neosho* and *Sims* at 0915 hrs and then searched in vain for the American carriers. At 1051 hrs the *Shōkaku*



The IJN's light carrier *Shoho* burns after being targeted by US carrier aircraft in a coordinated attack by dive- and torpedo-bombers, with VF-2 providing the fighter escort, on 7 May. The vessel was escorting the Port Moresby invasion force at the time (US Navy)

scouts realised that they had mistakenly identified the oiler and destroyer as aircraft carriers. Takagi now realised that the American carriers were between him and the invasion convoy, which put the latter in extreme danger. He ordered his aircraft to immediately attack *Neosho* and *Sims* and return to their carriers as quickly as possible. At 1115 hrs the 'Kates' and Zero-sens headed back to their carriers, with the torpedo-bombers still carrying their ordnance. The 36 'Vals',

however, attacked and sank *Sims* in a four-minute attack, leaving *Neosho* badly damaged and with its decks awash.

'Fighting Two' got in the first shots for the Americans when Ramsey noticed a Kawanishi E7K 'Alf' twin-float biplane near Misima Island. He despatched his second section, led by Lt(jg) Paul Baker (a former NAP and veteran of the 'Flying Chiefs'), to intercept the reconnaissance aircraft and Baker promptly forced the 'Alf' down after opening fire at an altitude of just 500 ft.

At 1040 hrs the US strike force sighted *Shoho* and deployed to attack. The vessel was protected by six A6M2 Zero-sens and two Mitsubishi A5M4 'Claude' fighters, with the rest of *Shoho's* carrier air group being aboard ship undergoing preparations for a strike against the American fleet.

CAG Ault sent in his dive- and torpedo-bombers for a classic coordinated attack at 1145 hrs. VB-2's CO, Lt Cdr William L Weldon, brought his SBDs down on the carrier to cover the attack and retirement of the TBDs. He later reported that 'as "Bombing Two" made its attack, the carrier was completing its second circle. There was no evidence of AA fire. Five minutes later the ship was a flaming wreck rent by tremendous explosions'. 'Bombing Two' hit *Shoho* with six 1000-lb bombs, which created a smoke screen that protected the slow TBDs.

As the Devastators bored in, two A5M4 'Claude' fighters swooped down on them, only to be intercepted in turn by Lt(jg) Paul Baker's section. Keeping up his speed and refusing to engage the nimble 'Claudes' in individual combat, Baker claimed both fighters. It appears he only damaged them, however, as two 'Claudes' were also claimed by VF-42, one of them by CO Flatley – *Shoho* had only launched two A5M4s. The first torpedo was dropped at 1149 hrs by 'Torpedo Two's' CO, Lt Cdr James Brett, and the last at 1152 hrs. Five hits were recorded and the slow torpedo-bombers were able to get away without loss.

VS-2, led by Lt Cdr Robert E Dixon, targeted *Shoho* shortly after VB-2 had completed its attack. As Dixon subsequently reported, 'It was obvious we had caught them by surprise. They had a number of aeroplanes on deck, and one was coming up from the hangar deck on the elevator. I could see them all clearly as I kept my eye on them, sighting for the release point'. 'Scouting Two' scored two hits and Dixon radioed the *Lexington*, 'Scratch one flattop! Dixon to carrier. Scratch one flattop!' Torn apart, *Shoho* sank at 1235 hrs. Only 203 of the carrier's 834-man crew were recovered.

The lessons learned in the fleet problems of the 1930s had been applied here with precision as the *Shoho* became the first aircraft carrier sunk in battle by carrier aircraft. Two SBDs from *Lexington* and one from *Yorktown* were lost during the attack. Fearing more strikes, Rear Admiral Goto withdrew to the north while the Port Moresby Invasion Force turned towards Rabaul. The US Navy had succeeded in the strategic goal of stopping the New Guinea invasion.

With the IJN still unsure of the location of the American carriers, eight 'Kate' scouts were launched from *Shōkaku* at 1515 hrs to sweep 200 miles westward. With the opportunity for a daylight attack narrowing, Takagi chose his most experienced crews for the mission. At 1615 hrs 12 'Vals' and 15 'Kates' were launched (without fighter escort) and instructed to fly bearing 277 degrees out to a distance of 280 miles. At about the same time the eight scouts reached the end of their search leg and turned back without spotting the American vessels in the thick overcast.

At 1747 hrs *Lexington's* CXAM radar detected the inbound Japanese strike. Eleven Wildcats from VF-2 and VF-42 were flying CAP at the time, and Paul Ramsey's division was sent out to intercept the incoming raiders since its Wildcats were equipped with new IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) gear. Eighteen more F4Fs were also hastily launched from both carriers. Ramsey found nine 'Kates' inbound, and his Wildcats were perfectly positioned for a bounce. He and his wingman took one side of the formation while Paul Baker and his wingman took the other.

Ramsey initiated a high side gunnery pass and hit the first 'Kate' from 700 yards, causing it to explode. He then shot at a second torpedo-bomber from a distance of 300 yards, the aircraft burning all the way down until it hit the murky sea. Baker shot down a third 'Kate' while his wingman hit a fourth that finally burst into flames and crashed. Baker then disappeared into the darkening sky as he gave chase to a fifth, and moments later an explosion lit the sky. It was theorised that Baker must have collided with his victim.

Ramsey's division had completely broken up the Japanese attack, shooting down five 'Kates'. The surviving 'Vals' and 'Kates' all jettisoned their ordnance and turned for home as the sun set at 1830 hrs, only to run into VF-42's two divisions. Two more 'Kates' and a 'Val' fell to the guns of the F4Fs.

The surviving D3As, their crews briefly confused regarding the identity of the ships they had spotted below them, mistakenly circled in preparation for landing before AA fire from US destroyers drove them away. Noel Gayler and his division were returning to *Lexington* at that moment, and they too were briefly bracketed by American fire as they entered the recovery pattern. Gayler recalled that 'they had a whole bunch of 0.50-cal machine guns independently operated on the catwalk. Somebody opened fire, and in those days the fire discipline was not very good, so everyone started shooting. The Landing Signal Officer realised what was happening because he knew who he had in the landing pattern. He turned around and hit the nearest guy across the face with his signal flags and knocked him away from his gun. Gradually the word went up the line and they realised. Christ, I had my wheels and flaps down when they opened up!'

The American and Japanese fleets were now 100 miles apart. During the night the warm frontal zone with low-hanging clouds that had hidden



Lt Noel Gayler was one of the transferees from VF-3 who joined VF-2 in April 1942 in order to provide the unit with a core of combat-experienced Naval Aviators. Serving as leader of the fourth division, he claimed two 'scout bombers' shot down over the US carriers on 8 May. These successes, combined with three victories during his previous service with VF-3, made him 'Fighting Two's' first ace (US Navy)

the American carriers on the first day of the battle moved north and east to cover the Japanese fleet. At dawn on 8 May, visibility over the IJN carriers was between two and fifteen miles in heavy cloud.

Eighteen SBDs were launched at 0635 hrs into the clear skies over the American carriers. At 0820 hrs *Lexington* SBD pilot Joseph G Smith spotted the Japanese carriers through a hole in the thick clouds. At 0822 hrs a *Shōkaku* 'Kate' search aeroplane commanded by Lt Kenzo Kanno sighted the American carriers. The opposing forces were approximately 210 miles apart. Both raced to launch their strikes.

The Japanese combined strike force of 18 Zero-sens, 33 'Vals' and 18 'Kates' was launched at 0915 hrs, with Lt Cdr Kakuichi Takahashi leading the attack from *Shōkaku* in a 'Val'. *Yorktown* and *Lexington* each launched separate strikes. *Yorktown*'s six F4F-3s, fifteen SBDs and nine TBDs were also on their way by 0915 hrs. Ten minutes later *Lexington* launched seven F4F-3s, with Noel Gayler's division flying escort for twelve TBDs and Lt Albert O Vorse's three-aeroplane division, which included Ens Bill Eder, escorting fifteen SBDs. Both American and Japanese fleets now headed directly for each other's location at high speed so as to shorten the distance their aircraft would have to fly on their return journeys.

The *Yorktown* SBDs arrived over the Japanese fleet at 1032 hrs, pausing to allow the slower TBDs to arrive so that they could then conduct a simultaneous attack. *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku* were about four miles apart, with *Zuikaku* hidden under a rain squall – the Naval Aviators were hampered both by the poor weather and the 16 Zero-sen fighters of the Japanese CAP. VF-42 managed to shoot down two Zero-sens in exchange for two Dauntlesses, while *Yorktown*'s dive-bombers were able to hit *Shōkaku* with two 1000-lb bombs that tore open its forecastle and caused heavy damage to the flight and hangar decks. The torpedo-bombers scored no hits.

The *Lexington* strike force found the Japanese vessels at 1130 hrs, the formation having broken up in the towering cumulus and then been unable to form up for a coordinated attack. Vorse's three-aeroplane division was forced to abort, leaving the SBDs vulnerable to attack. Unsurprisingly, the Dauntlesses were immediately intercepted by the Japanese CAP within minutes of appearing overhead the carriers, and as the dive-bombers attempted to attack the remaining Wildcats struggled to keep the Zero-sens at bay.

Noel Gayler's division, flying low and slow with the torpedo-bombers, was taken apart by four Zero-sens that sent his wingman down on their first pass. Gayler himself then became involved with an enemy fighter;

'I think the guy I tangled with was a much better pilot than I. He got on my tail pretty promptly, and he was a very good shot. His wingmen went by on both sides. As soon as I saw them, I took the stick with both hands and pushed into a dive, but there wasn't enough altitude to gain speed. I came around on another Jap and made a big hairy climbing turn, taking a long shot at him, and fell out for lack of airspeed just as I saw him starting to burn. It was just such an incredibly confusing, mixed-up situation, with poor visibility and people yelling on the radio.'

Gayler then managed to flame a second Zero-sen that flew in front of him. He claimed only one of these aircraft probably destroyed, however. The remaining two pilots in his division failed to share in his good fortune, falling victim to the IJNAF fighters.

One *Lexington* SBD hit *Shōkaku* with a third 1000-lb bomb, causing more damage, while two Dauntlesses made unsuccessful attacks on *Zuikaku*. The rest of the strike force was unable to find the IJN carriers in the poor weather. Had the American aircraft not become separated in thick cloud, it is likely *Shōkaku* would have been sunk. Nevertheless, the flightdeck of the Japanese carrier had been badly damaged and 223 of its crew killed or wounded. Unable to conduct further air operations, Capt Takatsugu Jojima asked permission to withdraw from the battle, to which Takagi agreed. At 1210 hrs *Shōkaku*, escorted by two destroyers, retired to the northeast.

At about the same time that the first American aircraft reached the Japanese fleet, *Lexington's* radar detected the IJNAF strike 68 miles out and vectored nine Wildcats to intercept it. Paul Ramsey's three-aeroplane division was sent out at an altitude of 10,000 ft, and it was the first to run into the Japanese. Ens Ed Sellstrom spotted the 69 aircraft, with 'Kates' at 9000 ft, 'Vals' at 14,000 ft and Zero-sens at 18,000 ft.

Because of the heavy losses suffered the night before, the Japanese could not execute a full attack on both carriers. Regardless, *Zuikaku's* Lt Cdr Shigekazu Shimazaki led the 'Kates' in, sending 14 to attack *Lexington* and four to attack *Yorktown*. As they dove toward the task force from a height of 2000 ft, Sellstrom went after them. He soon discovered that the B5Ns were going too fast to overhaul, although he eventually built up enough speed in his dive to engage the rear vic of three and flame the last 'Kate' five miles from the carriers. Sellstrom was then set upon by the Zero-sen escorts, and he claimed two of them damaged before escaping in a dive.

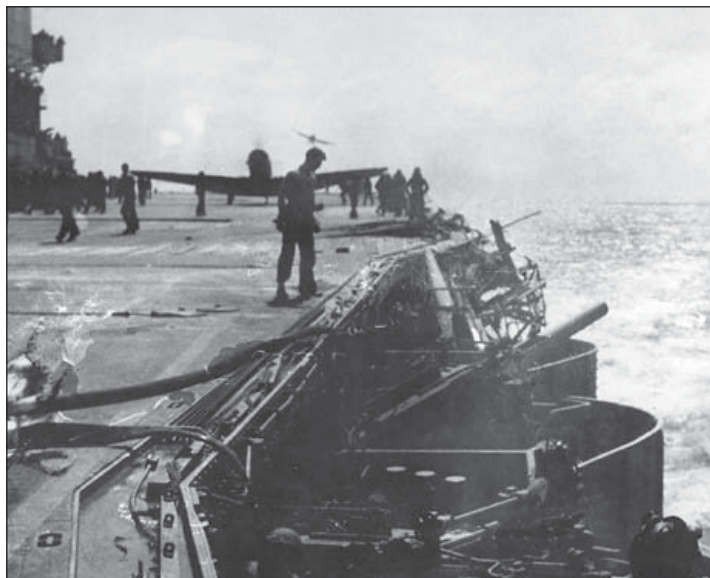
Due to Wildcat losses the previous day, and the need to send escorts on the carrier strike, the F4Fs defending *Lexington* and *Yorktown* had been supplemented by 23 SBD-3 Dauntlesses, including six from VS-2. Twelve Zero-sens attacked four of the VS-5 SBDs, led by future ace Lt Stanley 'Swede' Vejtasa, who managed to manoeuvre his Dauntless to enable his rear gunner to shoot down a Zero-sen while he shot down two others with his twin forward-firing 0.50-cal machine guns. VS-2 Dauntless pilot, and future ace, Lt(jg) John Leppla, and his rear-seater, Aviation Radioman Third Class Donald K Liska, added two more Zero-sen victories to their four claims (two destroyed and two damaged) from the previous day. Finally, VF-42's Lt(jg) Richard Crommelin managed to shoot down a pair of Zero-sens as well before he was hit himself and forced to ditch.

The defending American fighter pilots had made the mistake of expecting that the 'Kates' would attack in a similar manner to the TBDs – low and slow. Because of this mistake, the six Wildcat pilots from VF-42 were too low at 1000 ft, from where they could only watch the 'Kates' swarm in overhead at speeds above 200 mph to drop their deadly Type 91 'Long Lance' torpedoes at an altitude of around 1500 ft. The four 'Kates' that attacked *Yorktown* all missed, as the carrier turned away from the torpedo tracks. However, the others successfully employed a 'hammer and anvil' attack on *Lexington*, which had a much larger turning radius than *Yorktown*. At

Future ace Lt Albert O Vorse (second from right) led the escort of VB-2 SBDs on the strike against the IJN fleet on 8 May. Forced to abort due to poor weather en route, however, Vorse and his two wingmen arrived overhead *Lexington* just after it had been attacked by 'Val' dive-bombers from *Shōkaku*. Vorse would receive the Navy Cross for his actions in the battle, downing two of the D3As. The remaining pilots in this photograph, which was taken when Vorse was still serving with VF-3, are, from left to right, Ens Robert Dibb (seven victories), Ens Richard Loesch (one victory) and Ens Francis Register (seven victories) (US Navy)



Even though mortally damaged, *Lexington* brought aboard the survivors of the strike against *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku* on the afternoon of 8 May. Here, a VT-2 TBD is taxiing up the flightdeck, while in the background VF-2's Ens John Bain is about to land back aboard – he had claimed a 'Type 00 VF' destroyed during this mission. Shortly after the destruction, precluding the transfer of eight valuable F4Fs (including one from VF-42), as well as TBDs and SBDs, to *Yorktown* (US Navy)



1120 hrs 'Lady Lex' was hit by two torpedoes. The first buckled the port aviation gasoline stowage tanks while the second ruptured the port water main, reducing water pressure to the three forward fire rooms and forcing the associated boilers to shut down. Thousands of tons of water poured in, requiring counter-flooding to maintain an even keel. As the 'Kates' sped away, *Lexington's* gunners cut down four of them.

Meanwhile, the 33 'Vals' had circled to attack from upwind, and they did not commence diving on the carriers from 14,000 ft until shortly after the 'Kates' had completed their torpedo runs. Nineteen *Shōkaku* 'Vals', led by Lt Cdr Takahashi, lined up on *Lexington*, while the remaining fourteen aircraft, led by *Zuikaku's* Lt Cdr Tamotsu Ema, dove on *Yorktown*. VF-42's Wildcats, led by Fred Borries, attempted to intercept Takahashi's force, but they were well protected by escorting Zero-sens and the F4F pilots had to dive away to save themselves. Two Naval Aviators from the unit circling above *Yorktown* enjoyed better success against Ema's formation, damaging two 'Vals' in their dives and throwing off the aim of the others.

Takahashi's dive-bombers inflicted more damage on *Lexington* with two hits and several near misses. At 1127 hrs, *Yorktown* was hit in the centre of its flightdeck by a single 250 kg (550 lb) semi-armour-piercing bomb that penetrated four decks before it exploded, causing severe structural damage to an aviation storage locker and killing or seriously wounding 66 men. Twelve near misses damaged the vessel's hull below the waterline. Two of the dive-bombers were shot down by a VF-42 aircraft during the attack.

As the 'Vals' made their escape, they ran the gauntlet of Wildcats and SBDs, including the division led by future ace Albert 'Scoop' Vorse. He and his wingmen were returning to *Lexington* after having aborted their participation in the carrier strike because of bad weather. They were immediately involved in the fight, as future ace Bill Eder recalled;

'My wingman and I headed for two Jap aeroplanes, but lost them in the clouds. Then we became separated, and I turned and saw an enemy fighter below me. He turned up toward me as I headed down toward him, and we met head-on. I was firing four 0.50-cals on a down slant

and he was firing on an up slant. I could see his 20 mm stuff was falling short, although his 7.7 mm rounds were doing better. Then my 0.50-cals began hitting him. Almost immediately he sort of snap-rolled, then spiralled downward, uncontrolled. My emotion was "I have scored, and I'm glad my 0.50-cals were more adequate than his guns".

During the clash overhead the US carriers, three SBDs and three Wildcats were downed. The IJNAF in turn lost three 'Kates', a 'Val' (resulting in the death of Lt Cdr Takahashi) and Eder's Zero-sen.

The American and Japanese strike forces ran into each other during their return flights to their respective fleets. Wildcats of VF-42 shot down a 'Kate' and two 'Vals', while Noel Gayler was also credited with two dive-bombers destroyed. With the destruction of these aircraft he had become VF-2's first ace – Gayler had previously claimed three victories while assigned to VF-3.

By 1233 hrs the fires aboard *Lexington* were out. The ship was still operating despite the torpedo hits when the survivors of its carrier strike returned. Noel Gayler did not notice any damage as he approached for landing;

'She was making 25 knots and operating aeroplanes. She looked okay from the air. It was only after I landed that I noticed nobody was paying any attention to me, contrary to before. I looked around and noticed that some of the flightdeck crew had strange expressions on their faces. Then I saw flecks of fire-fighting foam all over the deck, at which point I realised that she had been hit.'

Eder's division also landed aboard *Lexington*. 'We were to refuel, rearm and re-launch. However, before that was accomplished the below-decks fires reached the hangar deck'. While *Lexington* still seemed able to function, Gayler tried to organise another strike against *Zuikaku*. By this time, however, there was no way to refuel the aeroplanes.

As TF 17 recovered aircraft, Rear Admiral Fletcher assessed the situation. The flyers reported heavy damage to one carrier, but that another had escaped unscathed. Both of Fletcher's 'flattops' were hurt and his carrier air groups had suffered high fighter losses. Fuel was also a concern for the escorts due to the loss of *Neosho*. At 1422 hrs Rear Admiral Fitch notified Fletcher of reports, supported by intercepts of enemy radio traffic, that there were still two undamaged IJN carriers in the area. Believing he faced overwhelming Japanese superiority, Fletcher decided to withdraw from the battle.

At 1430 hrs Rear Admiral Hara informed Vice Admiral Takagi that only 24 Zero-sens, eight 'Vals' and four 'Kates' were currently operational. Takagi was also worried about fuel for his vessels, as some of his cruisers were down to 50 percent capacity and some destroyers were as low as



At 1525 hrs on 8 May *Lexington* was rocked by a huge explosion that sealed the veteran carrier's fate. The vessel's damage control and repair teams had fought for hours to save the ship, but the fires started by the IJNAF torpedo- and dive-bombers were uncontrollable. All the aircraft onboard the carrier had been shifted aft, with the eight F4Fs optimistically spotted first for takeoff. They all went down with the vessel (US Navy)



Yet another arrival from VF-3, Ens 'Bill' Eder claimed a single 'Type 00 VF' victory and a 'Type 96 VF' as a probable on 8 May, before landing back aboard *Lexington*. A few hours later he abandoned ship, being plucked from the water by the destroyer USS *Dewey* (DD-349). As this photograph clearly shows, 'Bill' Eder saw plenty of action following the loss of 'Lady Lex'. Indeed, he 'made ace' in March 1945 whilst leading VF-29 – the swastika-adorned French tricolour flags in his scoreboard denote strafing victories he claimed with VGF-29 during Operation *Torch* (the invasion of French North Africa) in November 1942 (US Navy)

20 percent. At 1500 hrs Takagi notified Vice Admiral Inoue that his fliers had sunk two American carriers – *Yorktown* and a 'Saratoga-class', but heavy losses in aircraft meant he could not continue to provide air cover for the invasion. Inoue's aircraft had also sighted Rear Admiral Crace's Australian-American force, and in light of this he had recalled the invasion convoy to Rabaul and postponed Operation *Mo* until 3 July. *Zuikaku* and its escorts turned towards Rabaul while *Shōkaku* headed for Japan to undergo repairs.

At 1247 hrs sparks from unattended electric motors ignited gasoline fumes near *Lexington's* central control station. The resulting explosion killed 25 men and started a large fire. Another large explosion occurred at 1442 hrs, causing a second blaze. A third explosion came at 1525 hrs, and 13 minutes later damage control reported that the fires were now uncontrollable. The crew began abandoning ship at 1707 hrs, as Gayler recalled; 'We were driven to the extreme stern by the fire. The ship's service ice cream plant was in the extreme port stern quarter. Some clown passed the word that there was free ice cream and

sailors who were abandoning ship lined up for it. Of course they puked it up as soon as they had been swimming in salt water awhile. There was no panic, no worry about being picked up. The water was warm and the destroyers moved in with cargo nets.'

After 90 minutes in the sea, Gayler was picked up by a destroyer.

Bill Eder remembered;

'After the abandon ship order was given, I waited my turn and descended a knotted line to the warm water. I found an inflated life-raft with three older chief petty officers aboard. Since I had a life-jacket, I stayed alongside in the water. Pretty soon the USS *Dewey* [DD-349] came along and picked us up. They threw us a line and I, being the young'un, held it for the chiefs to climb up. When it was my turn I was too exhausted to climb and a sailor had to come down and put a line around me so they could winch me up.'

At 1915 hrs on 8 May the destroyer USS *Phelps* (DD-360) fired five torpedoes into the burning *Lexington*, which sank in 2400 fathoms at 1952 hrs. Some 216 of its 2951-man crew went down with the vessel, along with 36 aircraft. *Phelps* and the other assisting warships left immediately to rejoin *Yorktown*, after which TF 17 departed the Coral Sea to the southwest.

The experienced IJNAF aircrews had performed more effectively than their US Navy counterparts. However, they had suffered much higher losses, losing 90 killed, compared with 35 Naval Aviators. Japan's cadre of highly skilled carrier aircrews were irreplaceable because of an institutionalised limitation in the IJNAF's training programmes and the absence of a pool of experienced reserves to call on. The Battle of the Coral Sea started a trend that would result in the irreparable attrition of Japan's veteran carrier aircrews during campaigns in the Solomons and Rabaul. The Battle of the Coral Sea, the first naval battle in which the opposing ships never saw each other, was a tactical victory for the Japanese but a strategic victory for the US Navy since the IJN never mounted another offensive operation in the South Pacific.



Although of poor quality, this shot is truly unique, as it is the only photograph known to exist of VF-2 F4F-3 Wildcats in flight following the sinking of CV-2. Six fighters from VF-2 were on CAP when the carrier was rocked by the series of explosions that eventually sank it, the 'Fighting Two' pilots being forced to recover back aboard *Yorktown*. Returning to Hawaii with the carrier, they were put ashore and used in the training of replacement fighter pilots until VF-2 disestablished on 1 July 1942 (US Navy via Thomas Doll)

'Fighting Two' had lost its ancestral home with the sinking of *Lexington*. Without an aircraft carrier, the squadron was disestablished on 1 July 1942, but its legacy lived on. Lt Cdr Paul Ramsey was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions at Coral Sea, and he became CO of CAG-14 aboard the USS *Ticonderoga* (CV-14) in 1943. Postwar, he commanded USS *Philippine Sea* (CV-37) during the Korean War. Rising to the rank of vice admiral, Ramsey was appointed Commander in Chief, US Pacific Forces in 1964 and became the first veteran of the Battle of the Coral Sea to attend the annual celebration in Sydney, New South Wales, in 1966. He retired as Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air in 1972.

Lt Noel Gayler had received his first Navy Cross following his actions in February in defence of *Lexington* and his second for again defending the ship that March – on both occasions he was serving with VF-3. His third Navy Cross was awarded for his actions at Coral Sea with VF-2. Subsequently leading VF-12 in 1944-45 and seeing further action from the flightdeck of USS *Randolph* (CV-15), Gayler also enjoyed a long and successful career in the US Navy postwar. In 1972 he became head of the National Security Agency, and three years later he was appointed Commander in Chief, US Pacific Forces. Gayler retired in 1981.

Lt Albert O 'Scoop' Vorse was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions at Coral Sea. Transferred to 'Fighting Six', he fought at Guadalcanal from August to November 1942 and was credited with a further three victories. Made CO of VF-80 upon its establishment in February 1944, Vorse saw considerable aerial combat with the unit flying from USS *Ticonderoga* (CV-14) and USS *Hancock* (CV-19). Indeed, he had taken his victory tally to 11.5 by war's end. Vorse retired as a rear admiral in 1962.

Willard E 'Bill' Eder was also awarded the Navy Cross for his actions at Coral Sea. Subsequently assigned to VGF-29 embarked in USS *Santee* (ACV-29), he received a Silver Star for combat operations during the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942. Eder remained with the unit when it became VF-29 in March 1943, and in April 1944 he assumed command of the squadron. The unit saw considerable combat whilst embarked in USS *Cabot* (CVL-28) between October 1944 and April 1945, allowing Eder to increase his score to 6.5 victories. He retired from the US Navy with the rank of captain in July 1965.

'THE RIPPERS'

The third distinct squadron designated VF-2 was established on 1 June 1943 at NAS Atlantic City, New Jersey. This 'Fighting Two', known as 'The Rippers', was the last fighting squadron activated by the US Navy during World War 2 to bear the same designation as a previous unit in the conflict. With the vast increase in the training programme since Pearl Harbor, the US Navy was able to do what its Japanese opponents never could do – use combat-experienced pilots as the cadre around which to form new units.

As squadrons multiplied during the great expansion of 1943, pilots posted in came from one of three distinct groups. Up to a third of the flying personnel were combat veterans. The second group were pilots who had spent a year in Training Command as instructors – they had a great deal of flying experience, and were also experienced in dealing with students. The third group of aviators were recent graduates of the training programme. Typically, the unit leadership cadre was made up of combat veterans and instructors.

Given that the US Navy had a policy of appointing Annapolis graduates as squadron commanders and an aversion to putting Naval Aviation Cadet (NAVCAD) Reservists in those positions, it was frequently the case that the squadron CO and XO were lieutenant commanders and lieutenants who might be Annapolis graduates, with experience in Training Command. Their senior Division Leaders, generally newly promoted lieutenants, arrived with combat experience, while Section Leaders were experienced lieutenants (junior grade) who were recent combat veterans or instructors. Naval Aviators performing the role of wingmen were ensigns who had recently graduated from the training programme. Squadrons were divided up by these backgrounds. As Ens Don Brandt, who joined VF-2 in February 1944, recalled, 'We fresh-caught ensigns mostly lived in awe of our superiors and hoped to emulate them'.

Such a unit was the new 'Fighting Two'. Its CO, future ace Lt Cdr William 'Bill' Dean, was a graduate of the Annapolis class of 1934 and had been a Naval Aviator since 1936. Prior to taking command of VF-2, Dean had been stationed at NAS Miami, where he worked closely with future 'Fighting Seventeen' CO Thomas Blackburn in developing the training syllabus for fighter pilots during 1942. He was CO of SBD-equipped VB-2 for the first half of 1943, and then transferred to VF-2 upon its establishment.

Dean's wealth of prewar fleet experience, as well as his time in Training Command, made him the right man to prepare newly graduated pilots for their 'final examination' in actual combat. Alone amongst fighter squadron commanders within the US Navy in World War 2, Dean saw that creating opportunities for all the pilots in his unit to score aerial victories was the best way to cultivate high morale. He would have no 'favourites', as many of his contemporaries did, and was remembered by his pilots as being as willing to take a CAP assignment as to lead a fighter sweep. 'Cdr Dean led by example', recalled Don Brandt, 'and he



Lt Cdr William 'Bill' Dean took command of VF-2 when it was established on 1 June 1943. Having impressed Cdr 'Butch' O'Hare, CO of CAG-6, when 'Fighting Two' briefly embarked onboard the newly commissioned USS *Lexington* (CV-16) in late October 1943, Dean took VF-2 onboard USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) the following month at the direct request of O'Hare. Under his command 27 pilots of VF-2 became aces, with Dean finishing as the unit's top scorer with 11 victories to his name (US Navy)

never asked anyone to take an assignment he wouldn't take himself. We loved him'.

While Dean initially assumed the position of acting CAG, in addition to fighter leader, CAG-2 was soon joined in late June 1943 by its new CO, Lt Cdr Roy L Johnson (a graduate of the Annapolis class of 1929). VF-2's sister squadron 'Bombing Two' was initially equipped with SBD-5 Dauntless dive-bombers, although it was soon deeply involved in the fleet-wide effort to bring the new Curtiss SB2C-1 Helldiver to operational capability. As another bombing squadron engineering officer involved in this effort recalled, 'The SB2C had three fewer engines than a B-17, and four more hydraulic fittings'. The Helldiver was an example of *force majeure* – it was in full production and there was no alternative to it. Squadrons worked through more than 800 modifications to get their 'Beasts' ready for combat. It was commonly believed that SB2C stood for 'Son of a Bitch Second Class'. Unlike VB-2, 'Torpedo Two' was fortunate to receive the reliable Grumman TBF-1C Avenger from the outset.

Lt Cdr Dean was supported by several combat-experienced pilots who joined VF-2 from 'Fighting Ten', which had been led during the Solomons campaign by Lt Cdr James 'Jimmy' Flatley. Veterans of service aboard *Enterprise* at the Battle of Santa Cruz and in the defence of Guadalcanal at the height of the struggle for the island in 1942, they included XO Lt John E Eckhardt (Annapolis 1938) and future aces Lt L E 'Tex' Harris (Annapolis 1939), who already had a score of 1.25 Japanese aircraft destroyed, and Lt(jg) Bill Blair.

Flight Operations Officer Lt(jg) Roy M 'Butch' Voris also came from 'Fighting Ten', and he would subsequently become one of VF-2's leading pilots. Born in Los Angeles, California, on 17 September 1919, Voris' childhood hobby was building model aeroplanes out of balsa wood and tissue paper. As a youth he was thrilled to read the exploits of Eddie Rickenbacker and other World War 1 aces, and he spent hours watching aeroplanes taking off and landing at nearby Mines Field (now Los Angeles International Airport). Voris joined the US Navy through the NAVCAD expansion programme in 1941.

As Voris recalled in a 2004 interview, 'When the war clouds were rolling in I was living in San Francisco. I walked past a big recruitment sign that said "Fly Navy", with a pilot standing on the wing of an aeroplane looking off into the wild blue yonder'. By February 1942 he had received his commission as an ensign and earned his Wings of Gold as a Naval Aviator. That summer, in the aftermath of the battles of Coral Sea and Midway, he reported to newly commissioned 'Fighting Ten'. Following the Battle of Santa Cruz in October 1942, VF-10 moved to Henderson Field, where Voris saw combat against the IJNAF's 'first team'.

Lt(jg) Roy M 'Butch' Voris claimed his first victory (a 'Nagoya Zero') over Guadalcanal in November 1942 whilst flying with VF-10. Badly wounded moments later by a second Zero-sen that he had failed to spot behind him, he spent months in hospital recovering from his injuries. Voris joined VF-2 as its Operations Officer upon the unit's establishment, and he went on to claim six victories with 'Fighting Two' (US Navy)





Lt Arthur Van Haren was the top-scoring Hispanic ace of World War 2 with nine victories. Hailing from Superior, Arizona, his first success came with the downing of two 'Zekes' over Guam on 11 June 1944 (US Navy)

'I shot down my first Japanese Zero-sen at Guadalcanal', Voris explained, 'but I didn't see one coming up behind me and I got shot up and knocked out of the sky. I didn't bail out – they would shoot you out of your parachute, and if you landed in the water the sharks would eat you. Although I was covered in shrapnel wounds and had a dead stick – I'd lost the engine – I glided back to Guadalcanal. I was a lucky boy'. Assignment to VF-2 marked Voris' return to the frontline after he had recovered from his wounds. Future squadronmate Ens Don Brandt remembered Voris 70 years later as 'the best leader and the best teacher I ever came across in the Navy'. Following the war, then-Lt Cdr Voris was selected to organise and lead the US Navy Flight Demonstration Team, the Blue Angels.

Among the junior officers who came to the squadron out of the Training Command was future ace Lt(jg) Arthur 'Van' Van Haren. Joining the US Navy in the wake of Pearl Harbor, he was one of the few Naval Aviators of Latino heritage within the US Navy, which at the time actively discriminated in respect to ethnic background when it came to choosing its officer candidates. 'Van', from Superior, Arizona, had proven himself to be such an apt student that after he received his Wings of Gold in the autumn of 1942 he was retained at Pensacola for a year as a flight instructor, where he further honed his flying and gunnery skills. By the time 'Fighting Two' was established in June 1943, Van Haren was a 'high-time Hellcat pilot' with ten hours in the type, having flown it at Pensacola.

While VF-2 was initially equipped with eight General Motors FM-1 Wildcats, its new Hellcats arrived in early July. Van Haren's instruction skills were immediately put to the test as he oversaw the transition of his squadronmates to their new mount.

Popular mythology has described the Hellcat as the 'answer' to the Zero-sen, the Grumman machine having been created specifically to take on the IJNAF fighter. The truth is more prosaic, for the design of the Hellcat commenced before America had in fact entered the war, while the prototype first flew only a month before PO Koga's A6M2 Zero-sen was recovered from Akutan Island, in the Aleutians, and brought stateside for testing. It would have been technically impossible to design an aeroplane in mid-1942 that would have had any hope of appearing in operational units only a year later.

The US Navy had recognised the limitations of the Wildcat as early as 1940. The Vought F4U Corsair, ordered that same year, was the first American fighter to exceed 400 mph in level flight. The loss of the only prototype early on in the test programme badly affected progress with the new aircraft. Urgently seeking a backup, the US Navy turned to Grumman, initially suggesting an upgrade of the Wildcat through the fitment of a 1600 hp R-2600 engine in place of its 1200 hp R-1830. It was hoped that such a fighter could be fielded by the fleet until the F4U made its appearance.

However, Grumman chief designer Bob Hall pointed out to the pilots at the Bureau of Aeronautics' fighter desk that such a 'redesign' was really a new design. He suggested Grumman be allowed to work on such a project 'wholeheartedly' in order to create something new and truly different. Hall had paid attention to the lessons of air combat being learned in Europe, and he presented an idea for a fleet defence fighter that carried enough fuel to stay on station for hours, had sufficient ammunition

to allow it to shoot down everything it encountered and a wing big enough that it could out-maneuvre anything it came across.

With the Bureau of Aeronautics' approval, Grumman commenced initial design work on what would become the F6F Hellcat on 30 June 1941. The plan called for use of the 1650 hp Wright R-2600 Cyclone radial engine, which did indeed power the first prototype. Combat reports led Hall to request more power, however, resulting in the mating of the airframe with the superb Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp – arguably the best piston engine ever built for use by an aircraft – which provided an increase in power to 2000 hp. The Cyclone-powered XF6F-1 first flew on 26 June 1942, and its in-flight performance confirmed the need for additional power. The XF6F-3, fitted with a Double Wasp engine, made its first flight on 30 July. Its performance in flight immediately confirmed that it was the superior variant.

There were fewer changes made between the prototype and production Hellcat, and fewer changes between the two production sub-types, than any other American fighter of the war. The F6F had wide-track main landing gear that retracted into the wing. The undercarriage was so strong that the aeroplane could literally be dropped onto a flightdeck from a height of 20 ft without suffering damage – a drastic improvement over the narrow-track landing gear fitted to the F4F.

With the low-set wing and raised cockpit, the new fighter provided the best visibility for both combat and carrier landing of any naval fighter. The first production F6F-3 flew on 3 October 1942 and entered operational service five months later.

In light of its subsequent combat history, the F6F Hellcat can easily be named the most successful naval fighter ever built. Despite being flown by inexperienced pilots who had received only limited training, the aeroplane could more than hold its own against its opponents, while it was tractable enough that the same moderately-trained Naval Aviator could bring a damaged F6F back and land aboard his carrier. Even if the aeroplane did not end up in one piece after a landing, the pilot frequently climbed out of what was left, shaken but unharmed.

Naval Aviators had no trouble falling in love with the Hellcat. As 13.5-victory ace Lt Cdr George Duncan of 'Fighting Fifteen' recalled after the war, 'My initial impression of the Hellcat was that I was in a completely different ballpark than that of the SNJ or the Wildcat. The tremendous power, the comfort of the cockpit and the ease of handling of the aeroplane throughout its entire flight envelope was unbelievable'.

'Fighting Two' completed gunnery training at NAS Quonset Point, Rhode Island, in July and moved on the following month to carrier qualification aboard USS *Charger* (CVE-30), sailing in Chesapeake Bay – the unit was shore-based at NAS Norfolk, Virginia, during this period. VF-2's work-ups were not without loss, however. On 22 July Ens Earl 'Spider' Evans and 'Obie' O'Brien were still airborne when a violent storm



F6F-3 BuNo 04778 was amongst the first Hellcats delivered to the US Navy by Grumman in mid 1943. Although initially equipped with FM-1 Wildcats, VF-2 received its first F6F-3 in July 1943 (US Navy)



The first US Navy ace of World War 2, Lt Edward H 'Butch' O'Hare of VF-3 received the Medal of Honor for his defence of *Lexington* off Rabaul on 17 February 1942 – he downed five attacking IJNAF 'Betty' bombers. Promoted to lieutenant commander, O'Hare was made CO of CAG-6 in September 1943. Impressed by the performance of VF-2 during exercises in Hawaii that October, he brought the squadron aboard *Enterprise* as a replacement for the scattered VF-6 for the Gilberts invasions. In the face of Japanese nocturnal attacks on the task force, O'Hare developed the 'Bat Team' concept of Hellcats led by a radar-equipped TBF to find attacking bombers at night. He was killed on the night of 26-27 November 1943 when he was shot down by friendly fire whilst attempting to attack a 'Betty' bomber (US Navy)

swept through the area. Diverted to NAS Cape May, New Jersey, Evans spun in over the Atlantic to become the first pilot from the unit to be killed in the line of duty.

On 6 September the squadron departed Quonset Point for San Diego, arriving at NAS North Island on the night of 8 September. It then travelled north to NAS Alameda, on San Francisco Bay, where VF-2 was embarked in an escort carrier for transport to Hawaii – its Hellcats shared deck space with attrition replacement P-47 Thunderbolts for the USAAF. Arriving at Pearl Harbor on 18 September, the squadron was initially stationed at NAS Barbers Point before moving to NAAS Puunene, on the island of Maui, and joining up with 'Bombing Two' and 'Torpedo Two'. All three units then set about completing advanced training before embarking in a carrier.

At the end of October the squadron went aboard the newly commissioned USS *Lexington* (CV-16) and demonstrated the results of its intensive training when pilots put on an impressive performance during a US Marine Corps landing exercise on 1 November 1943. Among those pleased by what he saw was the most famous

pilot in the US Navy at the time, Lt Cdr Edward H 'Butch' O'Hare. He had become the US Navy's first ace of the war defending the old *Lexington* during an attempted raid on Rabaul on 20 February 1942. Following a war bond tour of the USA, O'Hare was promoted to lieutenant commander and made CO of 'Fighting Three' in June 1942.

Renamed 'Fighting Six' in July 1943, the squadron had subsequently been divided in half, with the three divisions under O'Hare's command going aboard USS *Independence* (CVL-22) and the remaining three embarked in USS *Princeton* (CVL-23). The latter vessel took part in the first action undertaken by the new fast carrier task force on 31 August 1943, when naval aircraft struck enemy targets on Marcus Island. VF-6 was tasked with flying CAPs over the fleet.

Still divided and still aboard *Independence*, O'Hare's part of 'Fighting Six' finally saw combat on 5 October 1943 as part of TF 14. The latter was made up of the brand new fleet carriers USS *Essex* (CV-9), USS *Yorktown* (CV-10) and *Lexington*, as well as USS *Cowpens* (CVL-25) and *Independence*. TF 14 struck Wake Island, which had fallen to the Japanese in December 1941. This action marked the Hellcat's combat debut against the A6M, nearly 50 of which rose to defend the island. O'Hare shot down one of the Japanese fighters, as well as his sixth 'Betty' bomber as it attempted to attack the fleet.

On his return to Hawaii, O'Hare had been promoted to command CAG-6. With orders to embark in the newly-repaired *Enterprise* for the coming operations in the Gilbert Islands, O'Hare requested that the promising newcomers of 'Fighting Two' be transferred to his carrier air group so that he would have a cohesive, trained fighter squadron instead of the split unit that VF-6 had become. 'Fighting Two' would duly be introduced to combat via this temporary assignment. The squadron boarded *Enterprise* on 10 November 1943 as part of Task Group (TG) 50.2, and its combat debut came when the unit supported the invasions

of Makin and Tarawa, in the Gilbert Islands, on the 20th and 23rd of that same month.

Now overseeing three squadrons as CAG, O'Hare, who still insisted that everyone call him 'Butch', initially flew a TBF-1 command aircraft when on operations, the Avenger being crewed by gunner Aviation Ordnanceman 1st Class Del Delchamps and Aviation Radioman 2nd Class Hal Coleman. With its good radio equipment, docile handling and long range, the Avenger made an ideal command aircraft for the CAG. However, before heading into combat, TG 50.2 commander, Rear Admiral Arthur W Radford, allowed O'Hare to replace his Avenger with a Hellcat as his command aircraft. O'Hare selected F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 66168 to become his aeroplane, which he numbered '00'. He also chose 'Fighting Two's' Ens Warren Andrew 'Andy' Skon as his wingman.

VF-2's introduction to combat came on 19 November 1943 when strikes commenced against Makin. 'Tex' Harris claimed his third victory when his division intercepted a Nakajima E8N 'Dave' single-engined observation single-float biplane that he successfully set aflame for 'Fighting Two's' first victory with the Hellcat.

The first strike sent to attack Makin consisted of SBDs from 'Bombing Six' and TBFs from 'Torpedo Six', with the fighter escort led by CAG O'Hare. Japanese installations were hit by strafing Hellcats and dive-bombing Dauntlesses, with the Avengers also dropping 500-lb bombs (four apiece) in glide-bombing attacks. 'Andy' Skon's Hellcat was hit in the wing by flak, exploding some ammunition without further harm to the F6F. Following three strikes throughout the course of the day, AA fire on the island was eventually silenced and all targets destroyed. The



Launched in 1936, *Enterprise* was the US Navy's sixth aircraft carrier. It was one of only three American 'flattops' (alongside *Saratoga* and *Ranger*) commissioned prewar to survive the conflict. Participating in more major actions against Japan than any other carrier, 'The Grey Ghost' (a nickname earned after the Japanese had announced its sinking on three separate occasions) received 20 battle stars – the most of any US warship in World War 2. VF-2 only briefly served aboard the vessel in 1943-44 when it was temporarily seconded to VF-3 (US Navy)



VF-2 endured a difficult start to its time with CAG-6 following the squadron's embarkation in CV-6 during the second week of November 1943. This aeroplane was one of four Hellcats written off in operational accidents in the first 72 hours of the deployment. Although the F6F was a rugged aircraft capable of absorbing considerable punishment, meted out by both the enemy and day-to-day operations from an often-pitching flightdeck, some landings were simply too much for the Hellcat to cope with (US Navy)



Lt Walter L Chewning steps onto the burning fuel tank of the F6F-3 Hellcat flown by future ace Ens Byron M Johnson to effect a successful rescue of the pilot on 10 November 1943. Earlier that day Johnson had flown out to CV-6 from Barbers Point, Hawaii, with 37 other Hellcats as 'Fighting Two' embarked in *Enterprise* to participate in TG 50.2's strike on Makin Atoll. After taking off on a routine training exercise in white 30, Johnson immediately developed engine trouble and requested an emergency landing. He was waved off three times as he struggled to maintain control, but his tailhook eventually caught the third arresting gear wire and Johnson's Hellcat was slammed into the deck. When the fighter caught fire Chewning quickly raced to the pilot's aid, forcing open the F6F's jammed canopy and pulling Johnson to safety (US Navy)

Japanese gunners did, however, succeed in hitting Ens Wayne Harrold's Hellcat during the second strike, the pilot and his aircraft disappearing on the return flight to the carrier. He was VF-2's first combat loss.

Following the invasion of Makin on the morning of 20 November the island was under American control by mid-day, with its native inhabitants welcoming the US Marine Corps as liberators.

Having conceded that the US Navy enjoyed daylight air superiority over the Gilberts, the IJNAF began to send torpedo-armed G4M1 'Betty' bombers against the American carriers at night from bases in the Marianas – the first mission was flown on the night of 20-21 November. Responding to this nocturnal threat, Lt Cdr Dean and future ace Lt(jg) Danny Carmichael were launched into the pre-dawn greyness at 0445 hrs with orders to intercept the aircraft being plotted on radar. They were followed shortly thereafter by Lt Arthur Van Haren and Ens Park. Sixteen miles out, Dean and Carmichael spotted a 'Betty' at 10,000 ft and the former made a high side attack on the Japanese bomber and registered hits. He then lost the aeroplane in the gloom, resulting in him only being able to claim it as damaged.

In light of these nocturnal attacks, Rear Admiral Radford, O'Hare and Cdr Tom Hamilton (*Enterprise's* Air Officer) put effort into developing ad hoc counter-tactics that resulted in the first carrier-based nightfighter operations ever conducted by the US Navy. O'Hare's idea involved a three-aeroplane formation composed of one TBF Avenger, which would use its sea-search radar to find the airborne enemy, and two 'radarless' Hellcats. The latter would be vectored onto any enemy aircraft detected by the radar operator in the Avenger. The formations were dubbed 'Bat Teams'.

The interception plan developed required the Fighter Director Officer (FDO) to spot incoming enemy formations at a distance, at which point

a 'Bat Team' would be launched. The radar-equipped Avenger would lead the Hellcats into position behind the incoming bombers – close enough for the F6F pilots to spot the exhaust flames of the 'Bettys' – at which point they would close in and shoot down the Japanese bombers. The first interception was attempted at 0300 hrs on 24 November when Lt Cdr Dean and 'Butch' Voris were launched with an Avenger from VT-2. After several hours of fruitless vectors against targets found by the *Enterprise* FDO, the three aircraft landed back aboard the carrier at 0800 hrs. The following night three different attacking forces had been tracked over the fleet, but cloud cover prevented a launch of defending fighters.

The most important event in 'Fighting Two's' tour aboard *Enterprise* occurred on the night of 26-27 November. A large group of enemy aircraft were detected on radar just after sunset. When the call came to 'man planes', O'Hare was eating his dinner. Grabbing his plate, he ran to VF-2's ready room and assigned himself as one of the 'Bat Team' Hellcat pilots, along with his wingman 'Andy' Skon. 'Torpedo Six' CO Lt Cdr John C Phillips was at the controls of the Avenger, crewed by radar specialist Lt(jg) Hazen B Rand and turret gunner Aviation Ordnanceman 1st Class Alvin Kernan. The three aeroplanes launched from *Enterprise* between 1758 hrs and 1801 hrs.

Confusion soon endangered the success of the mission, with the Hellcats struggling to find the Avenger and the FDO having difficulty guiding any of them in the direction of the targets. O'Hare and Skon finally got into position behind the Avenger, at which point O'Hare, who was acutely aware of the danger of friendly fire in this situation, radioed Phillips. 'Hey Phil, turn those running lights on. I want to be sure it's a yellow devil I'm drilling'. Over the next 30 minutes Rand was able to guide the Avenger onto two 'Bettys', although the Hellcats were unsuccessful in gaining visual contact for long enough to take action. Surprisingly, Lt Cdr Phillips was able to shoot down both bombers with the Avenger's two wing-mounted 0.50-cal weapons, proving the effectiveness of the tactic. Now alerted, the remaining 'Bettys' separated in the darkness.

Thirty minutes after O'Hare, Skon and the TBF had been launched, a second 'Bat Team' was sent aloft into the darkness. This formation was led by 'Fighting Two's' skipper, Lt Cdr William Dean, with 'Butch' Voris as his No 2 and the XO of VT-2 flying the Avenger. Struggling to keep track of O'Hare's team, the FDO was again unable to assemble Dean's three-ship flight.

Shortly after Phillips shot down the second 'Betty', Ens Skon saw the shadow of O'Hare's Hellcat to his right as CAG came up into the 'five o'clock' position aft of the TBF. About the same time, gunner Kernan saw another 'Betty' above and almost directly behind O'Hare. Kernan opened fire with the 0.50-cal machine gun in the dorsal turret and a Japanese gunner fired back. O'Hare had been caught in a deadly crossfire. Seconds later, his Hellcat slid out of formation to port, pushing down slightly ahead at about 160 knots, then vanished into the darkness. Phillips called repeatedly to O'Hare but received no reply. Skon radioed, 'Mr Phillips, this is Skon. I saw Mr O'Hare's lights go out and, at the same instant, he seemed to veer off and slant down into darkness'. Phillips later stated that as the Hellcat dropped out of view, it seemed to release something that dropped almost vertically at a speed too slow to be anything other



Ens Warren A 'Andy' Skon was chosen by CAG 'Butch' O'Hare to fly as his wingman during VF-2's CAG-6 deployment aboard *Enterprise* for the Gilberts campaign. He was performing this role on the night of 26-27 November 1943 when the US Navy's first ace of the war was lost in a friendly fire incident. Skon subsequently claimed seven victories during VF-2's combat cruise aboard *Hornet* in 1944 (US Navy)



Lt Leroy E Harris was one of the VF-10 veterans who had seen action over Guadalcanal in late 1942, being credited with 1.5 victories. Made VF-2's XO upon its establishment on 1 June 1943, he duly claimed the unit's first success with the Hellcat on 19 November when he downed a 'Dave' observation single-float biplane while TG 50.2 was en route to the Makin Atoll, in the Gilbert Islands. His final tally stood at 9.25 victories by the end of VF-2's combat tour (US Navy)

than a parachute. Then something 'whitish-grey' appeared below – perhaps the splash of the aircraft plunging into the sea.

Phillips reported the position to *Enterprise*. At dawn, a three-aeroplane search was launched, but no trace of O'Hare or his aircraft was ever found. On 29 November a PBY Catalina also conducted a search, but with no result. The US Navy's first ace, and Medal of Honor recipient, was reported missing in action, most likely the result of 'friendly fire'. Gunner Kernan was believed to have mistakenly shot him down. The US Navy promoted Phillips to command CAG-6 on 4 December, and later awarded O'Hare (posthumously), Phillips, Skon, Rand and Kernan Navy Crosses for their roles in protecting the carrier and carrying out the US Navy's first combat nightfighting missions, with O'Hare being cited for leading the daring operations. Cynics have since concluded that the US Navy, forced to choose between courts-martial or medals for the Avenger crew, chose the latter, being unwilling to admit its biggest hero had been killed by friendly fire.

Alvin Kernan's memoir, *Crossing the Line – A Bluejacket's World War II Odyssey*, describes this night in detail from the perspective of the man who fired the Avenger's gun seconds before O'Hare disappeared. In 1997, researchers Steve Ewing and John B Lundstrom interviewed Skon, radar officer Rand and gunner Kernan extensively for their book *Fateful Rendezvous – The Life of 'Butch' O'Hare*. Their conclusion was that "Butch" fell to his old familiar adversary, a "Betty". Most likely he died from, or was immediately disabled by, a lucky shot from the forward observer crouched in the "Betty's" glassed-in nose. The nose gunner's 7.7 mm slugs very likely penetrated Butch's cockpit from above on the port side and ahead of the F6F's armour plate.

The 'Bat Team' concept was rendered obsolete with the arrival of radar-equipped F4U-2 Corsairs of VF(N)-101 aboard the fast carriers in early 1944.

Following the successful invasion of the Gilberts, *Enterprise*, with *Essex* and USS *Belleau Wood* (CVL-24), headed west toward the Marshall Islands on 28 November. The following day the task force was joined by *Lexington* and *Yorktown*. On 4 December the first strike against Kwajalein was launched at 0645 hrs, led by Lt Cdr Dean. The Japanese were taken by surprise, with only a few Zero-sen fighters taking off before the rest were strafed. 'Fighting Two' pilots Lt Richard J 'Griff' Griffin (a future ace) and Lt(jg)s Randy Carlson and William 'Shorty' LaForge were each credited with a Zero-sen shot down in the sudden melee. Dean's division claimed the destruction of four H8K 'Emily' flying boats, while 'Tex' Harris' formation destroyed three Nakajima A6M2-N 'Rufe' floatplane fighters that were caught at their moorings. In return, future ace Ens Gene Redmond suffered flak damage to his fighter that resulted in accelerated fuel loss. He attempted to make it back to his carrier but was eventually forced to ditch near a destroyer – Redmond was quickly rescued.

That night, as the carriers retreated from the Marshalls, the fleet was targeted by approximately 60 Japanese aircraft despatched from the Marianas between 2000 hrs and 0400 hrs the following morning. Although the IJNAF lost approximately 40 aircraft, including three 'Bettys' that were shot down by defending destroyers, it succeeded in sinking three transports and inflicting damage on a cruiser. In the immediate aftermath of these attacks, Japan's propaganda radio

broadcaster 'Tokyo Rose' claimed (once again) to have sunk the 'Big E', along with two cruisers. She also stated that 23 US Navy aircraft had been shot down during the raid.

Upon returning to Pearl Harbor on 9 December, 'Fighting Two' launched from *Enterprise* and landed back at Barber's Point. During the following week Lt Cdr Dean recommended 'Butch' Voris for a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), and Harris, Griffin, LaForge and Carlson for Air Medals. The squadron had met the test of combat.

VF-2 was reunited with its bombing and torpedo squadrons at NAS Kaneohe on the 'big island' of Hawaii on 18 December, after which CAG-2 continued training for combat.

In January 1944, Lt Cdr Dean was ordered to have seven volunteer pilots available on a temporary basis to report to the escort carrier USS *Kalinin Bay* (CVE-68), which was loaded with new Hellcats being sent to the fast carrier task force as replacement aeroplanes. Having embarked the 'experienced' pilots from VF-2, the vessel headed for Majuro Atoll. One of the Naval Aviators involved was future ace Ens Everett C 'Connie' Hargreaves, who recalled, 'having reached Majuro Atoll I received orders to catapult off *Kalinin Bay* and land aboard USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) to join VF-18'.

Following the successful invasion of Kwajalein and Roi-Namur atolls in the Marshalls in January 1944, in mid February TF 58 targeted the main Japanese naval base in the Pacific, Truk Atoll. During the biggest mission yet undertaken by the fast carriers, Hellcats from seven vessels shot down more than 200 Japanese aircraft, while dive-bombers and torpedo-bombers sunk several ships. At the conclusion of the strikes, Japan's 'Gibraltar of the Pacific' had been effectively neutralised.

VF-2 missed out on the Truk mission, the unit spending its time ashore in Hawaii conducting further training. Newly promoted Cdr Dean narrowly cheated death when he and Ens John M Edwards collided during air combat training on 27 February. The first any of the remaining pilots involved in the flight knew something had gone wrong was when they heard Edwards cry out 'My prop is gone!' over the radio. Moments later, Lt Charlie Harbert, the squadron engineering officer, saw a Hellcat without a wing flutter down. At almost the last moment, a figure emerged from the cockpit and a parachute blossomed as Dean made it out of his wrecked F6F. No one saw Edwards crash. VF-2 was reminded once again that there was truly no aspect of its work that was not intrinsically dangerous. Dean was found to have suffered a broken rib, but he was able to return to the squadron within a week.



Lt Richard J 'Griff' Griffin was a little older than many of his contemporaries in VF-2, being born in 1918. He had obtained a private pilot's licence three years before joining the US Navy in December 1940. Griffin's extensive flying experience came to the fore when he finally encountered a Japanese fighter in the air on 4 December 1943 during the first strike on Kwajalein, in the Marshall Islands. He quickly downed the 'Zeke', one of three credited to VF-2 (the first examples of the IJNAF fighter to be claimed by the unit with the F6F). By the time the unit's cruise had ended, Griffin's score stood at eight victories. He remained in the US Navy postwar, retiring with the rank of captain in April 1964 (US Navy)

US Navy fighter squadrons were large organisations, VF-2 having more than 40 pilots embarked in CV-6 when it headed for the Gilbert Islands in November 1943. Remarkably, Ens Wayne Harrold was the unit's only casualty during the brief deployment, being shot down by AA during the attack on Makin on 19 November (US Navy)

WESTPAC

CAG-2 was notified on 2 March 1944 that it would not be embarking in *Essex* as had been announced in February as the vessel would be returning home for an overhaul instead. Four days later it learned that the brand new USS *Hornet* (CV-12), named for the earlier USS *Hornet* (CV-8) that had carried the Doolittle Raiders, fought in the Battle of Midway and been sunk on 26 October 1942 at the Battle of Santa Cruz (the last carrier battle to date), would be home instead. The ship had arrived in Pearl Harbor on 4 March, whereupon its captain announced that CAG-2 would be replacing CAG-15, which he had decided was unready to enter combat. On 8 March CAG-2 duly qualified for carrier duty aboard *Hornet*. The vessel and its escorts, with Rear Admiral J J 'Jocko' Clark and his staff aboard, departed Pearl Harbor one week later, bound for a six-month deployment in the Western Pacific.

Don Brandt recalled, 'The guys from CAG-15 seemed awfully happy to be getting kicked off that ship, which seemed rather strange to us'. Lt John Bridgers of 'Bombing 15' would record in his memoirs, 'The day our group departed *Hornet*, I understood exactly how "B'rer Rabbit" had felt when he was thrown in the briar patch'. The men of CAG-2 were literally entering a 'hornet's nest' that had been created by the ship's commanding officer, Capt Miles Browning, former Chief of Staff to Adm Halsey, and an officer known as 'the most intemperate man in the Navy'.

Browning was one of the original aviators aboard *Langley* in 1922, and during the 1930s he had helped develop carrier warfare doctrine, the vessels themselves and the aircraft they would embark when the US Navy went to war in December 1941. Considered 'technically brilliant', he was hated with equal vehemence. Indeed, he seemed to go out of his way to create such hatred. Browning was a mean drunk who frequently drank to excess, and he had an unerring capacity for insulting behaviour. During a visit to Halsey's South Pacific headquarters, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox had been shocked by Browning's disrespectful behaviour, and counselled the Admiral to rid himself of his Chief of Staff. Halsey valued Browning's professional expertise, however, and he was willing to put up with what he termed 'eccentricities'. Nevertheless, Browning had incurred the personal opposition of the Secretary of the Navy – a man with a reputation going back to his days as the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* for not being one to cross.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm Ernest J King (an officer well known for his own 'eccentricities') finally pried Halsey and Browning apart by making the latter an offer he could not refuse – command of the new *Hornet*. When other senior aviators complained of Browning being given the vessel, King insisted that 'the idea was to get rid of him at once, whatever

Known as 'the best strategist and worst officer in the navy', Capt Miles Browning was the first commanding officer of USS *Hornet* (CV-12). He was a man who seemed to go out of his way to antagonise everyone with whom he came in contact, from Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to the junior seaman aboard ship. After he refused to put a boat over the side and allowed two crewmen to drown who had fallen overboard, he was relieved of his command. Every Naval Aviator in CAG-2 who had dealings with Browning remembered him for years afterwards as 'the worst man I ever met in the service' (US Navy)



the price'. Such an attitude by one's superior commander might give a new captain pause to consider how he took advantage of his opportunity. Browning was not that man.

Predictably, he destroyed his relations with the officers aboard ship, prowling the bridge like a caged animal. Every order was a snarl and his subordinates reacted to him with fear and eventual hatred. He publicly berated Division Heads, and even went so far as to 'read out' a senior member of the crew over the ship's public address system.

Lt(jg) Ken Glass of VT-2 recalled the period spent under Browning's control as 'the worst experience of my entire naval career'. Browning required that aircraft when launched use no more deck space than the 'book' called for. While the Hellcats had no problem achieving this and the Avengers usually made it aloft okay, the underpowered SB2C-1C Helldivers suffered terribly, with several aeroplanes lost on takeoff and only a few crews saved. The Helldivers would struggle down the 400 ft of deck Browning decreed was all they required, dropping from sight off the bow as the pilot dove for the ocean to pick up flying speed while cranking up the landing gear. The aeroplane would then reappear above flightdeck level as the pilot milked up the flaps and turned quickly to get away from the onrushing mass of the ship. Don Brandt recalled 'you couldn't have gotten me to fly one of those aeroplanes in those conditions with a direct order'.

As the carrier task group crossed the International Dateline on 18 March tragedy struck shortly after the launch of the morning CAP. Two of the four F6Fs, flown by Ens H L 'Lefty' Carlson and Glendale D 'Cookie' Williams, collided as they joined up on the division leader, future ace Lt Landis E 'Blood' Doner. Recently returned 'Connie' Hargreaves, flying the No 4 aircraft, was shocked to see the two Hellcats disappear into the ocean off the carrier's port bow.

Hornet and CAG-2 arrived at the new fleet anchorage at Majuro Atoll on 20 March 1944, whereupon the crew received news that the vessel would depart two days later for strikes on the Palau islands, in the western Carolines. CAG-2 would then attack Yap and Woleai, in the eastern Carolines, operating as part of TG 58.1 under the command of Rear Admiral Clark. The task force crossed the equator at 1433 hrs on 25 March, launching four Hellcats shortly thereafter (led by Cdr Dean) in a fruitless attempt to intercept a Japanese snoopers picked up on radar.

On 29 March CAG-2 prepared itself for its baptism of fire. 'Fighting Two's' intelligence officer, Ens Thomas L Morrissey, recorded the scene of preparation in the squadron ready room;

'Targets for strikes on "K-Day" have been assigned, plotting boards are being put in order and flight leaders can be seen cornering their respective flights to give them final instructions.'



Death could come to a Naval Aviator at any moment. This SB2C-1C Helldiver from VB-2 flipped over onto its back after failing to engage an arresting wire and going into the barrier on *Hornet* in May 1944. Helldiver units suffered particularly heavy losses around the boat throughout the aircraft's somewhat chequered service career (US Navy)



USS *Hornet* (CV-12) in the spring of 1944, the aircraft carrier being painted in distinctive Measure 32 camouflage. An early 'short-hull' Essex class ship, it was commissioned in November 1943 and joined the Fast Carrier Task Force at Majuro Atoll on 20 March 1944. Twelve days earlier, CAG-2 had replaced CAG-15 aboard the vessel in Hawaii (US Navy)

Lt(jg) Franklin T 'Gabe' Gabriel claimed VF-2's first victory from CV-12 when, on 29 March 1944, he downed a 'Betty' bomber whilst TG 58.1 was en route to the Caroline Islands. Gabriel had been credited with eight victories by the end of VF-2's combat tour (US Navy)



During the day two Kawanishi H6K 'Mavis' flying boat snoopers were shot down by the CAP. At 1700 hrs two divisions of Hellcats were launched after a group of bogies had been detected via radar. One division was led by 'Tex' Harris and the other by 'Tex' Duff. Lt(jg) F T 'Gabe' Gabriel, flying with the latter division subsequently spotted a 'Betty' and sent it down in flames for the first of his eight victories. Four more 'Bettys' were shot down by Hellcats from other carriers, while Harris' division spotted four Nakajima Ki-44 'Tojo' fighters but was unable to close with them. Don Brandt recalled that sleep came uneasily for many that night in anticipation of the strike on Palau the following day.

On 30 March the Hellcats of VF-2 targeted Palau alongside Helldivers and Avengers from CAG-2. Lt(jg) 'Andy' Skon's division exploded an ammunition ship, while future ace Lt(jg) J T 'Mike' Wolf shot down the only Zero-sen to get into the air. The IJNAF snoopers spotted on radar over the previous days had obviously been able to get off their reports, since the warships TF 58 had expected to find in harbour were gone. Nevertheless, CAG-2 suffered losses, with two Avengers crashing shortly after takeoff and a third TBM being downed by flak over the harbour. As VT-2's Ken Glass recalled, 'it was a rough initiation for the torpedo squadron into the big leagues'. That evening, seven Nakajima B6N 'Jill' torpedo-bombers from Yap attempted to attack TF 58. However, Hellcats from VF-31 launched from the escort carrier *Cabot* shot them all down after they had been vectored onto the enemy aircraft shortly after 1700 hrs.

31 March saw the successful conclusion of the Palau strikes, with Lt(jg) 'Griff' Griffin claiming the only aerial victory over the target area when he downed a Ki-44 'Tojo' – his squadronmates had to make do with strafing ground targets. Later that day Ens Harry 'Stinky' Davis shot down another H6K 'Mavis' while on CAP – this was the first of four victories and two probables that he would claim with the unit.

On 1 April TF 58 attacked the small coral atoll of Woleai. After three days of combat operations, 'Fighting Two' had suffered no losses. The ships returned to Majuro Atoll on 6 April, before putting to sea again one week later and heading south-southwest to support the invasion of Hollandia and Aitape (codenamed Operation *Reckless*). This operation would see the conclusion of Gen Douglas MacArthur's New Guinea campaign.

On 20 April strikes were launched preparatory to the invasion, which was scheduled for the following day. Earlier that morning *Hornet* had refuelled its accompanying destroyers, newly-promoted Lt(jg) Morrissey



recording that 'the ship's band serenaded the "tincans" from the hangar deck with "Two O'Clock Jump"'. Shortly after dawn, CAG-2's first strike hit Wakde, near Hollandia, sinking two IJN transports offshore. A large number of Japanese aircraft were also accounted for with the strafing of a nearby airfield. Further attacks followed over the next 24 hours, and CAG-2 emerged from these strikes without loss.

On 23 April orders came down for a second strike on Truk, scheduled for the 29th. The following day (24 April) future ace Lt(jg) 'Danny' Carmichael downed a snooping 'Betty' bomber for the first of his 13

Flying a CAP during Operation *Reckless* (Hollandia and Aitape landings) in April 1944, the pilot of this well-worn F6F-3 has cranked open the canopy to help cool his warm cockpit. Few enemy aircraft were encountered during this period, with VF-2 downing just a solitary 'Betty' on 24 April – it was credited to future 13-victory ace Lt(jg) 'Danny' Carmichael (US Navy)

Pilots and plane captains from VF(N)-76 Detachment 2 pose for the camera aboard CV-12 in May 1944. Squatting in front of the group is the detachment CO, and future ace, Lt Russ Reiserer. Fellow future ace Lt(jg) Buck Dungan is standing second from left. Like Reiserer, Dungan claimed the bulk of his seven victories in daylight. However, unlike his CO, these were all in F6F-3Ns from the detachment, rather than F6F-3s borrowed from VF-2 (US Navy)





Just moments away from departing *Hornet* on 6 May 1944, the pilot of this heavily weathered Hellcat from VF-2 conducts one last check of his cockpit before signalling that he is ready for takeoff. Note the badly chipped paint along the leading edge of the wings and the cordite staining from the guns, which have clearly been recently fired (US Navy)

victories. This would prove to be the only aerial success recorded by VF-2 during the Hollandia and Aitape landings.

Prior to the mission on 29 April, 'Connie' Hargreaves briefed the squadron on his experiences there during the first strikes on the Japanese base back in February, noting that heavy flak was likely to be encountered. As predicted, CAG-2 was opposed by the heaviest AA artillery fire it had yet seen during its attack on Param Island at Truk, although all 'Fighting Two' aircraft returned safely, some with flak damage. The sole emergency happened when Bill LaForge lost engine power whilst pulling out from his strafing pass. As he contemplated ditching in the middle of the 20-mile-long lagoon, while doing everything he could think of to restart the engine, the R-2800 spluttered back into life and he pulled up at 500 ft to rejoin the squadron and return to the ship. VT-2 was not so lucky, losing two Avengers and their crews after they were hit by heavy flak.

Rain squalls on 30 April prevented the launching of any strikes until 1000 hrs, the day's action over Truk resulting in no American aeroplanes being lost. Clearly, the once formidable base was now a mere shadow of its former self. The lack of fighter opposition indicated that the IJNAF was husbanding its forces for future action.

Whilst returning to Majuro Atoll, TF 58 targeted the island of Ponape on 1 May. Previous attacks had gutted its defences to such an extent that flak opposition encountered was negligible. During the recovery of aircraft from the raid tragedy struck when a hung-up 100-lb bomb beneath the wing of a Helldiver came loose upon landing and exploded, killing two flightdeck crew and injuring 25 others. In the middle of all this a second

Helldiver landed and crashed into the barrier when its tailhook pulled out. 'Butch' Voris was next to land, and he hit his brakes so hard when he failed to catch one of the arrestor wires that his Hellcat nosed over, its spinning propeller gouging chunks out of the wooden flightdeck.

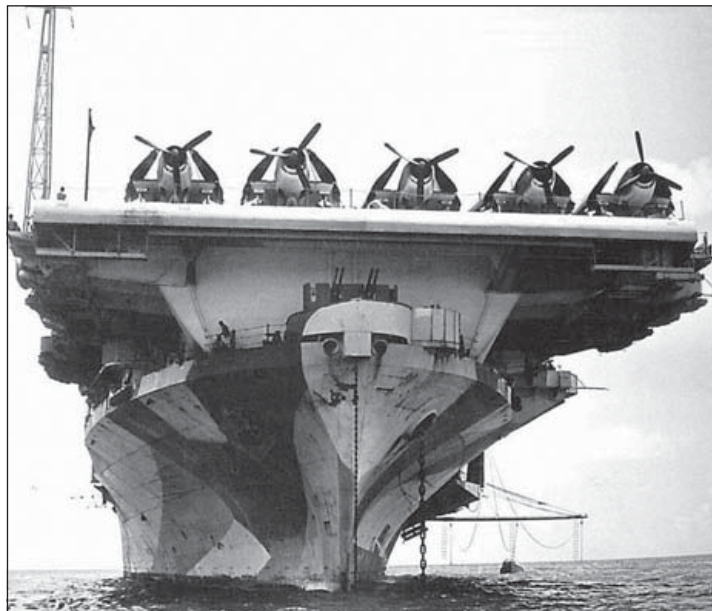
3 May saw the task force re-cross the equator on its homeward course. The war was put aside for a day as 'Davy Jones' came aboard with King Neptune and his Court. The pollywogs of the ship's company and CAG-2 were duly initiated into the Secrets of the Deep to become honourable Shellbacks. The task force dropped anchor in Eniwetok Lagoon on 4 May, thus completing its final sweep prior to commencing the next major operation in the Central Pacific campaign.

With the final strike on Ponape, TF 58 had completed a four-month rampage across the Central Pacific. During this time the fast carriers had struck at will in a convincing show of power and competence which fully demonstrated that the visionaries aboard *Langley* 20 years earlier had been right about what a carrier fleet could accomplish. There had been spectacular dogfights resulting in record numbers of Japanese aircraft being destroyed. The IJNAF had been defeated so thoroughly during these engagements that it would soon never pose a serious threat to the US Navy again.

The end of *Hornet's* first combat deployment also coincided with the dismissal of its much despised CO, Capt Browning. During the evening of 5 May, while the vessel was anchored at Eniwetok, some 1500 crewmen were gathered in the hangar deck watching the film *A Guy Named Joe*, starring Spencer Tracy. During a quiet moment in the movie someone heard a hissing noise, which sounded like a lit fuse. Another yelled 'There's a bomb loose!' Pandemonium ensued as the sailors fought and struggled to evacuate the hangar deck. In the confusion several men jumped or were pushed overboard. Capt Browning grabbed the microphone and began berating the men verbally. When the ship's First Lieutenant informed him there were men overboard, he refused to lower (*text continues on page 62*)



Capt William D Sample took command of *Hornet* on 29 May 1944 after the much despised Capt Miles Browning had been relieved following the drowning of two of his sailors. Sample would later be recalled by CAG-2 veterans as being the polar opposite of Browning. He was a man who led by personal example, and who held the welfare of his crew foremost above everything else. Under Sample's command, *Hornet* would become one of the outstanding ships of the US Navy (*US Navy*)



Hellcats from VF-2 loom over the rust-streaked bow of CV-12 whilst the carrier is at anchor off Majuro Atoll on 29 May – the day that Capt William Sample took command of the ship (*US Navy*)

1

F6C-1 Hawk BuNo A6969/black 2-F-1 flown by
Lt Cdr G F Chapline, Commanding Officer of
VF-2B, NAS San Diego, California, 1928



2

F2B-2 BuNo A7711/black 2-F-1 flown by
NAP 1/c George F Ocskay, USS Langley
(CV-1), eastern Pacific, 1930



3

F4B-4 BuNo A8913/black 2-F-13 flown by
Lt(jg) Richard H 'Dick' Best, VF-2, NAS
San Diego, California, 1935



- 4 F2F-1 BuNo A9643/black 2-F-1 flown by Lt Cdr Apollo Soucek, Commanding Officer of VF-2, NAS San Diego, California, 1937



- 5 F2A-2 Buffalo BuNo 1412/black 2-F-7 flown by Chief NAP Gordon E Firebaugh, NAS San Diego, California, 1940



- 6 F2A-2 Buffalo BuNo 1415/white 2-F-1 flown by Lt Cdr Herbert S Duckworth, Commanding Officer of VF-2, NAS San Diego, California, Spring 1941





7 F2A-3 Buffalo BuNo 01549/white 2-F-18 flown by NAP 1/c Howard S Packard, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), December 1941



8 F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-1 flown by Lt Cdr Paul H Ramsey, Commanding Officer of VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), May 1942



9 F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-5 flown by Lt Albert O Vorse, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), May 1942

10

F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-13 flown by
Lt Noel A M Gayler, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), May 1942



11

F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-19 flown by
Ens Willard E 'Bill' Eder, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2),
May 1942



12

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 1 flown by Lt Cdr
William A 'Bill' Dean, Commanding Officer of VF-2,
USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), November-December 1943



13

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 66168/white 00 flown by Cdr Edward H 'Butch' O'Hare, Commanding Officer of CAG-6, USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), November 1943



14

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 6 flown by Lt(jg) Warren A 'Andy' Skon, VF-2, USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), November 1943



15

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 32 flown by Lt Arthur Van Haren, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 11 June 1944



16

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 41117/white 18 flown by Lt Cdr Leroy E 'Tex' Harris, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 12 June 1944



17

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 40079/white 13 flown Ens Donald L Brandt, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 13 June 1944



18

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 25973/white 12 flown by Lt(jg) Earling W 'Zesk' Zaeske, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 15 June 1944



19

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 25 flown by Lt Lloyd G Barnard, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 15 June 1944



20

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 16 flown by Lt(jg) Merrill W Vineyard, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 19 June 1944



21

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 36 flown by Ens Wilbur B 'Spider' Webb, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 19 June 1944



22

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 40807/white 33 flown by Lt(jg)
Everett C 'Connie' Hargreaves, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12),
24 June 1944



23

F6F-3N Hellcat BuNo 42158/white 9 flown by Lt Russell
L Reiserer, VF(N)-76 Detachment 2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12),
July 1944



24

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 20 flown by Lt Roy M
'Butch' Voris, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), September 1944



25

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 14 flown by
Lt(jg) Daniel A Carmichael, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12),
September 1944



26

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 45 flown by
Lt(jg) Eugene D 'Red' Redmond, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12),
September 1944



27

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 1 flown by
Cdr William E 'Bill' Dean, Commanding Officer of VF-2,
USS *Hornet*, September 1944





a whaleboat and rescue them. Two crewmen drowned, while fifteen others suffered injuries including broken arms and legs.

The captain's poor handling of this situation prompted the US Navy to set up a Board of Inquiry, which found Browning guilty of negligence. Following the Board's finding, TF 58 commander Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher requested his immediate relief, a decision supported by the Browning-hating senior chain of command clear up to, and including, the Secretary of the Navy. On 27 May it was announced that *Hornet* commander Capt Miles Browning would be relieved. Two days later Capt William D Sample took command of the vessel. He would later be recalled by CAG-2 veterans as being the polar opposite of Browning. Sample was a man who led by personal example and held the welfare of his crew foremost. Under his command, *Hornet* would become one of the outstanding ships of the US Navy. Miles Browning, the man known as both a brilliant strategist and a failure as a human being, spent the rest of the war 'beached' at the National War College.

On 1 June Cdr Jackson D Arnold (Annapolis 1934), a Naval Aviator since 1937, fletted up from command of VT-2 to become commander of CAG-2 after his predecessor, Cdr Roy L Johnson, was promoted to the position of Air Officer aboard *Hornet*.

TBF-1C Avengers of VT-2, SB2C-1C Helldivers of VB-2 and F6F-3 Hellcats of VF-2 crowd the flightdeck aboard *Hornet* at Majuro Atoll in late May 1944. Two *Casablanca* class escort carriers are at anchor behind CV-12 (US Navy)

'HEY RUBE!'

The greatest American combat fleet yet to ply Pacific waters – some 54 warships, consisting of carriers, battleships, heavy and light cruisers and destroyers of the Fifth Fleet – sailed from Majuro Atoll on 6 June 1944 to participate in Operation *Forager*. As the vessels departed, news spread that Allied forces had landed in Normandy. The liberation of Europe was finally underway, and this would divert history's eye from the coming event in the Pacific. The fleet's goal was the Mariana Islands, 1800 miles and five days' sailing to the north-northwest. Seven heavy fleet carriers and eight light carriers of TF 58 under Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher would support an invasion force of 535 ships and 127,000 assault troops under the command of Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner.

The invasion was the most important to date in the Pacific War. With the Marianas under American control, air bases could be built that would put the new Boeing B-29 Superfortress in range of Japan itself. The Japanese were equally aware of the consequences of losing these islands, thus guaranteeing a maximum defensive effort by the IJN as the US Navy penetrated the inner perimeter of Japan's Pacific empire.

Fifth Fleet commander Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance planned to keep TF 58 west of the island chain, ready to exchange blows with the Japanese Mobile Fleet should it intervene. However, the fleet's major responsibility was protection of the invasion forces, not the destruction of the Japanese fleet.

To some, it seemed nature had taken sides in the coming fight, for at this time of year the prevailing winds were easterlies. This meant that the American carriers would have to turn away from the enemy in order to launch their strikes, adding extra miles to the missions flown, while the Japanese carriers would be able to head toward the Americans as they launched their aircraft.

As it became clear to the IJN that the next American goal must be the Marianas, Combined Fleet Commander Adm Soemu Toyoda began gathering the disparate combat elements of his fleet at Tawi-Tawi, starting in mid-May. Adm Jisaburo Ozawa brought the carrier striking force from Lingga Roads in Singapore. At the heart of the force were five heavy carriers. *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku* had participated in the Pearl Harbor attack and the carrier battles at Coral Sea, in the Eastern Solomons and Santa Cruz in 1942. *Taihō*, Ozawa's flagship, was a brand new carrier of an improved *Shōkaku* class. Boasting the first armoured flightdeck of any Japanese carrier, it had only joined the fleet two months earlier. The carriers *Junyō* and *Hiyō* had participated in the Aleutians strikes. These vessels were joined by four light carriers, *Ryūhō* (not to be confused with *Ryūjō*, which was sunk at the Battle of the Eastern Solomons in 1942), *Chitose*, *Chiyoda*, and *Zuihō*. There were also five battleships, *Yamato*, *Musashi*, *Kongō*, *Haruna* and *Nagato*, under the command of Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita.

Following intensive training operations to make good the aviation losses incurred at Rabaul and Truk, this was the strongest Japanese fleet to date. Indeed, the carriers had more aircraft embarked going into the battle than

their American opponents, although the aerial battles over the Pacific since the previous October had decimated what was left of the veteran pilots and aircrews of the IJNAF. Many of the replacements were barely able to operate from an aircraft carrier, let alone engage in aerial combat. The fleet arrived at Tawi-Tawi on 23 May.

The IJN's plan for the defence of the Mariana Islands was codenamed Operation *A-Go*. It hoped to pin the American fleet against the islands and attack them with shuttle flights from the carriers that then flew on to land at airfields on the Marianas. Refuelled and rearmed, the aircraft would strike the vessels again on their return flights to the carriers. TF 58 would be forced to stay close to the Marianas in order to provide support for the newly arrived invasion force.

On 27 May Japanese plans were thrown into disarray by the American invasion of Biak Island, north of New Guinea. Adm Toyoda immediately decided that this was the attack he must oppose first and foremost, and he prepared to send the fleet into action. Before he did so, a Japanese reconnaissance flight from the Marshall Islands found the Fifth Fleet (although not TF 58) still at anchor at Majuro Atoll. The Japanese were at a loss. Would this fleet support the invasion that had just happened, or participate in the expected Marianas campaign? Japanese staff officers thought it impossible the Americans could mount what was seen as two major invasions simultaneously – an indication of how little they understood the capabilities of their enemy.

The fact that the reconnaissance flight did not spot American carriers (which were at sea) led Adm Toyoda to decide the Biak invasion was the main attack, and he planned his sortie accordingly. On 10 June he decided to oppose the Biak invasion, sending Admiral Matome Ugaki, in command of the super-battleships *Yamato* and *Musashi*, the battleship *Haruna*, the heavy cruisers *Myoko* and *Haguro*, the light cruiser *Noshiro* and five destroyers, to attack the American invaders in Operation *Kon*.

On the morning of 11 June the carriers of the Mobile Fleet departed Tawi-Tawi to support Ugaki's attack force. At mid-day reports were received that the Fifth Fleet had appeared off the Marianas, at which point Adm Toyoda realised that he had underestimated American capabilities. Adm Ugaki was ordered to turn north with his battleships and rendezvous with the carriers as *Kido Butai* formed for battle. Operation *A-Go* was now in effect. Ozawa's Mobile Fleet was forced to wait in the Philippine Sea until Ugaki could join up, allowing his carrier force to be found and tracked by US submarines.

Rather than launching the traditional dawn strike, TF 58 initially targeted the Mariana Islands at 1300 hrs on 11 June. Although Saipan was the main target, CAG-2 was sent to hit airfields on nearby Guam. Cdr Dean led a fighter sweep in first, followed 30 minutes later by a combined strike of Helldivers and Avengers, escorted by more Hellcats. While the strike force was en route, the CAP division led by VF-2 XO 'Tex' Harris found and despatched three H8K 'Emily' snoopers.

The Orote peninsula on northwestern Guam was the target, the strike group encountering heavier flak than they had over Param during the Truk raid. Two SB2Cs were shot down in their dives, while 'Fighting Two's' Lt(jg) Howard B 'Tex' Duff was also forced to ditch north of the island after being hit by flak. As Dan Carmichael circled to check Duff's



Lt(jg) John T 'Mike' Wolf claimed three 'Zekes' over Guam on 11 June 1944, with VF-2 being credited with 52 victories in total. Wolf 'made ace' the following day when he downed an 'Irving' nightfighter 30 miles off Orote Point. His tally had reached seven victories by the end of his tour (US Navy)

condition, several Zero-sens engaged him at low level, while other Japanese fighters dove on the rest of VF-2. In the melee that followed, Carmichael managed to shoot down two fighters, but when he returned to the crash scene Duff was gone.

In the meantime, Cdr Dean was able to shoot down three ‘Zekes’ and a ‘Tojo’ to become the first ace to claim all of his victories while flying with VF-2. ‘Mike’ Wolf also claimed three ‘Zekes’ to take his overall tally to four, while ‘Irish’ Harrigan, Davey Park and future aces Landis E ‘Blood’ Doner and Arthur Van Haren each scored two. Single victories went to ‘Butch’ Voris, Leroy Robinson, ‘Andy’ Skon, Lester Sipes and Charles Carroll, all of whom would later ‘make ace’.

By the end of the day VF-2 had set a new fleet record by claiming 52 victories on 11 June, thus thrusting the unit into the vanguard of fighter squadrons in TF 58. This success was tempered, however, by the loss of ‘Tex’ Duff, who was one of the most popular men in the squadron. Known as a pilot who was always ready to volunteer for the tough missions, he possessed both a quick and wicked wit according to his squadronmates.

On 12 June fighter sweeps over northern Guam saw Japanese fighters again rise to give combat, although there were far fewer than the day before. ‘Fighting Two’ downed 11 ‘Zekes’ and ‘Tojos’, with two each to ‘Tex’ Harris (making him an ace, with 1.25 of his victories being scored with VF-10 in 1942) and Dick Griffin, while future aces Franklin E Gabriel, Gene Redmond, Ross Robinson, Leroy Robinson and Richard B ‘Razor’ Blaydes were all credited with single victories. John L Banks and Mike Wolf each claimed Nakajima J1N1 ‘Irving’ nightfighters that they had run into while returning from the first strike of the day, Wolf’s kill giving him ace status. On a second strike Lt John Searcy’s fighter was hit by large-calibre flak, although he managed to ditch successfully and was picked up by the lifeguard submarine USS *Stingray* (SS-186). Lt(jg) D ‘Demi’ Lloyd was shot down and killed in combat, however.

13 June saw three more strikes flown against Guam, on the second of which CAG-2 found a Japanese convoy of four cargo ships and two destroyers. These were attacked, and one cargo ship and both destroyers were left burning.

While the second strike worked over the Japanese convoy, CAG Arnold led a third strike made up of volunteers to Guam. Ens Don Brandt was flying as Cdr Arnold’s wingman, and as they approached Orote Point he checked his watch – it was 0913 hrs, and he was flying at 13,000 ft in Hellcat ‘13’. Arnold later recalled;

‘As we pushed over in a bombing run, AA fire intensified, and Ens Brandt’s aeroplane was hit almost immediately – smoke poured out! As he opened his canopy to bail out, I called to him not to do so, since I didn’t think he could land in the

This F6F-3 lost its tail when it caught an arrestor wire aboard *Hornet* following a mission over Guam on 12 June, the rear fuselage of the fighter having been damaged by flak over the target area. Although the tailless aircraft went over the side, its pilot was quickly rescued (US Navy)



water from his position, and parachuting onto shore would mean certain capture and almost certain death at the hands of the Japanese, who we had been briefed were taking no prisoners.'

Moments later Brandt jumped from his fighter as it nosed over towards Agana harbour. The wind carried him approximately a quarter of a mile off shore, and the remaining Hellcats then strafed the shoreline to discourage anyone from heading out to capture him.

As Brandt remembered his escape, he dove to get away from the bracketing flak, increasing speed to 360 mph. Fearful he could not get out at that speed, he unfastened his harness and slid open the canopy – wind pressure sucked him out immediately. Flung upside down when the parachute opened because

one riser was jammed beneath the back-strap, he struck the water head first and went under. Pulling out his survival knife, Brandt slashed at the harness and his parachute billowed and pulled away. His life raft went with it, only to sink minutes later when it became waterlogged.

At 1014 hrs Arnold put in a call to *Stingray*, which was only a few miles offshore, then ordered the dive-bombers to hit the shore positions – these contained several large guns that could endanger the submarine. A division of Hellcats also strafed a Japanese boat that tried to set out from shore to capture Brandt. In the water, the downed Naval Aviator managed to inflate his Mae West, at which point he discovered that the wind was pushing him away from shore. 'I was an unhappy ensign when I saw the aeroplanes turn back to the carrier', he later remarked. The Japanese did not fire at him during the next hour as he drifted in the bay, waiting for his rescuers to arrive.

At 1115 hrs *Stingray's* CO, Lt Cdr Sam Loomis, learned Brandt was still within range of the guns. Nevertheless, the submarine continued its submerged run toward the bay. Overhead, another strike force appeared, with Helldivers going after Japanese warships in the harbour. Helldiver pilot Lt(jg) LeMoyné spotted Brandt and abandoned his attack on shipping to drop a large raft to the downed pilot, who inflated it and crawled in.

Alone in the middle of Agana harbour, Brandt figured his time would be short before the Japanese would send out a boat to get him, but he continued paddling toward the entrance. 'I knew the sub couldn't pick me up, being this close in to shore and in the middle of the harbour'. Fortunately for Brandt, there was a way to be rescued. The Mariana Islands, product of the mid-Pacific collision of two tectonic plates, were thrust high, with steep drop-offs leading to the Marianas Trench, the



Ens Don Brandt was shot down by AA over Agana harbour, Guam, on 13 June 1944. He was eventually rescued when the lifeguard submarine USS *Stingray* (SS-186) entered the deep harbour and towed him safely back out to sea using its periscope. After a transpacific odyssey to rejoin his unit, Brandt eventually returned to VF-2 in late July (US Navy)

Rear Admiral J J ‘Jocko’ Clark, commanding TG 58.1, flew his flag aboard *Hornet*. Clark was perhaps the most aggressive of all the ‘fast carrier admirals’ of TFs 58 and 38 during the Central Pacific campaign. He later commanded TF 77 during the Korean War (US Navy)



deepest place in the ocean. With such deep water, *Stingray* could enter directly into the harbour submerged.

‘I suddenly noticed this periscope rise out of the water about two feet high’, Brandt recalled. ‘It slowed to a stop, and I paddled over. I took the life rope on the raft and looped it around the periscope, and we started moving toward the harbour entrance! I later learned the submarine ran in reverse all the way since there wasn’t room in the harbour to turn around’.

In the meantime, Arnold had returned to *Hornet* and quickly refuelled and rearmed;

‘We returned at about 1430 hrs and spotted Don still in his raft in the middle of the harbour. We again commenced runs on the beach to keep their heads down. I was cussing out the skipper of the submarine for his lack of action, then I flew low and realised Don was moving through the water a lot faster than the wind could carry him. I made a second pass and spotted the silhouette of the submarine under him. They were towing him out of the harbour!’

Arnold and a handful of other aircraft from CAG-2 circled to protect the submarine and Brandt. ‘Finally, after what seemed like a very long time to me, we were about three-quarters of a mile offshore, and they lowered the periscope, surfaced and picked me up’, explained Brandt. He and his squadronmate John Searcy, who had been rescued the day before, were soon reunited aboard *Stingray*. Over the next 30 days the two would have quite an odyssey in effecting a return to the group. Dropped off by the submarine at Eniwetok, they were able to convince the authorities not to return them to Hawaii. The Naval Aviators instead hitchhiked their way to Majuro and then on to the newly captured island of Saipan. With *Hornet* still operating in the area at the end of July, Searcy and Brandt were finally reunited with ‘Fighting Two’. ‘We flew together as a section for the rest of the tour’, Brandt remembered.

With the pre-invasion strikes having decimated Japanese air power in the Marianas, Fifth Fleet commander Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance ordered TF 58 commander Vice Admiral Mitscher to isolate the islands from further aerial reinforcement from Japan. The IJN’s Mobile Fleet had been spotted on 14 June in the western Philippine Sea, and it was expected to be in range for attacks by the 19th. Intercepted radio traffic indicated the Japanese were flying aeroplanes to the Bonin Islands, northwest of the Marianas, from where they would attempt to fly into Guam from Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima.

TG 58.1, consisting of *Hornet*, *Yorktown*, *Belleau Wood* and USS *Bataan* (CVL-29), under the command of Rear Admiral J J ‘Jocko’ Clark, sailed north on 14 June in company with TG 58.4, under the command of Rear Admiral William K Harrell aboard *Essex*, with USS *Langle* (CVL-27) and USS *Cowpens* (CVL-25), to strike Iwo Jima on 16-17 June, before returning to the Marianas in time to meet the Japanese fleet. The task groups were forced to operate in heavy seas as a typhoon was moving north of the Bonins.

The heavy weather caused by the typhoon created difficulty for the Japanese reinforcement plans. At Atsugi Naval Air

Field near Tokyo Bay, senior petty officer and leading Japanese ace Saburo Sakai had completed training young pilots for the Yokosuka Kokutai. He despaired of their chances in combat, since their level of training and experience was so low. Badly wounded two years earlier in combat at Guadalcanal, which had resulted in the loss of his right eye, Sakai expected to be transferred elsewhere in the training command now that his job was finished here. He was surprised to be told that he would be remaining with the Yokosuka Kokutai and helping to lead it into combat.

With news of the US fleet's arrival in the Marianas, the reinforcement effort began. Iwo Jima's defences were urgently in need of improvement, with the island being so lightly defended that the Americans could have taken it in just a few days. The Yokosuka Kokutai would provide air defence for the island, and for the other units staging through. Weather forced delay after delay upon the Japanese, however.

Despite the poor conditions, the US Navy task groups reached their target a day early, on 15 June, due to Rear Admiral Clark's decision to close on the Bonins at high speed. This in turn meant that he could head back to the Marianas in good time to participate in the coming fleet action. At 1345 hrs TG 58.1 launched strikes against Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima.

'Fighting Two' skipper Dean made certain to only send pilots who had yet to score any victories on the mission so that they too could register their first successes. Seven Hellcats swept over Iwo Jima while twelve went to Chichi Jima. Japanese fighters attempted to intercept the F6Fs, and VF-2 made the most of the opportunity. Over Iwo Jima, Lt Lloyd G 'Barney' Barnard became the unit's first 'ace in a day' with five 'Zekes' destroyed. His combat report for the mission read as follows;

'We were at 15,000 ft when I saw several "Zekes" making runs on some Hellcats below us at 10,000 ft. We pushed over after them, and as we did so I saw eight to ten enemy fighters coming in below me. I made a head-on run on one from above and turned as I passed to see him explode. Wings and debris went everywhere.

'I pulled up, missing one "Zeke", and another pulled in front of me at 9000 ft. I fired on him from "six o'clock" at the same level. He blew up and I went right through his fire.

'After that one, I turned around and spotted a "Zeke" on an F6F's tail. I fired a full-deflection shot from "nine o'clock" below, and he exploded too. By this time "Zekes" were blowing up all over the place.

'From there, I pulled around until I saw one on the water at about 200 ft. I got it, level at "eight o'clock", and it rolled over into the water.

'I climbed back up for altitude to 5000 ft and saw a "Zeke" above me at 8000 ft, making an overhead run on a Hellcat at 6000 ft. I followed it down to the water. It went into its run and pulled through faster than I did, so I went into a wing-over. Two more Hellcats closed, and the "Zeke" turned inside them. Before they could bring their guns to bear, I pulled up in a high wing-over and shot it down from "eight o'clock", above, 100 ft off the water.'

Future aces Lt(jg)s Merv Noble and Charles Carroll scored three apiece, while Byron Johnson and Earling W 'Zesk' Zaeske claimed two each – they too would 'make ace' in due course. Finally, Ens Connard and Elliott each scored a single kill. All the returning aircraft had difficulty getting



Lt Lloyd G 'Barney' Barnard claimed five 'Zekes' during the early afternoon sweep over Iwo Jima on 15 June, thus becoming VF-2's first 'ace in a day'. He had increased his tally to eight victories by the end of 'Fighting Two's' tour in the Pacific (US Navy)



Lt(jg) Charles H Carroll claimed three ‘Zekes’ during the same 15 June mission that ‘Barney’ Barnard downed his five – VF-2 pilots were credited with 17 ‘Zekes’ over Iwo Jima that day. Carroll ‘made ace’ four days later when he downed two ‘Vals’ over Orote Field, although he was in turn wounded by the rear gunner in one of the dive-bombers he attacked. Indeed, Carroll’s Hellcat was so badly shot up it was subsequently jettisoned over the side of CV-12 (US Navy)

aboard as the flightdecks rolled and tossed in the increasingly heavy seas. Noble had taken flak hits and had difficulty controlling his Hellcat at landing speed. Just as the LSO gave him the cut, *Hornet’s* stern dropped several feet. The resulting crash-landing was heavy enough to shear off a gear leg. One Helldiver failed to return, the victim of flak over the island. VF-2’s pilots reported poor tactics from their IJNAF opponents, who appeared to be totally disorganised.

During the night the nearby typhoon increased in intensity, forcing further strikes to be delayed until after midday on 16 June. Aerial opposition was almost non-existent over the target area, and all aeroplanes returned safely. That evening, the fleet turned south for the Marianas.

In Japan, the forecast on 16 June had seemed to provide the necessary good weather for the neophytes to make the journey to Iwo Jima. That day, as the US fleet battered Iwo, Sakai and 29 other IJNAF pilots left Atsugi in their Zero-sens bound for the recently battered island, only to run into high winds, thick overcast and torrential rains from the typhoon. This was far too severe for even the experienced pilots in the group to cope with, so they turned back.

With all four task groups of TF 58 reunited on 17 June, searches began the following day to find the Japanese fleet. ‘Fighting Two’ would send one Hellcat to fly with either a Helldiver or an Avenger on hours-long search missions that tested the endurance of pilots seated in cockpits lacking air conditioning, the outside temperature being amplified by the greenhouse effect of their Perspex canopies under the hot tropical sun. The IJNAF was also searching for the American fleet, and several sharp combats occurred over the Philippine Sea when Naval Aviators encountered their Japanese counterparts. While no US aeroplanes were lost, several IJNAF snoopers were shot down by Hellcats from the task force. Indeed, future ace Lt(jg) Bob Shackford of VF-2 downed an Aichi E13A ‘Jake’ reconnaissance floatplane for his first victory during the afternoon searches on 18 June.

‘Connie’ Hargreaves recalled his mission on this date in a 1990 interview with researcher Eric Hammel;

‘Many of us took assignments to search 380 miles out from the carriers, with a 50-mile cross leg. This was an unusually long search for fighters. We had to trust that the *Hornet* would be able to continue on its anticipated course, and that we would be able to notice any change in the force or direction of wave caps to enable us to plot more accurately our navigation back to the fleet. Most of the search flights wound up being five hours or more in length, with a maximum fuel supply for just six hours. This meant we required the most accurate navigation, for we might still have to wait for the carrier to respot aircraft on the flightdeck before bringing us aboard. It was our best effort, but none of us was able to report a sighting of the Japanese fleet.’

That same day WO Yoshida Katsuyoshi of the IJNAF’s 202nd Kokutai was preparing for the impending battle for the Mariana Islands;

‘On 18 June we were transferred from Kau to Peleliu. It was the night before what become known as the Battle of the Marianas. The 202nd Kokutai was to fill the bomber gap. All our Zero-sens were to be fitted with 60-kg bombs. We would become a fighter-bomber unit and attack enemy forces landing on Saipan. The next day, reveille was at 0330 hrs,

and we set off, filling our lungs with the bracing air of Peleliu. After flying for 90 minutes we landed on Yap, where the groundcrews filled our fighters with ammunition and fuel and attached the bombs. The Z-flag was flying on Yap, as it had traditionally since the Battle of the Japan Sea in 1905, as if to stress the crucial importance of this battle for our country.'

Yoshida Katsuyoshi was informed he would fly with the unit's Yokosuka D4Y3 'Judy' bombers. As they boarded their aeroplanes, his fellow pilot PO Furumura joked 'I'll show you a good place to die'.

Aboard *Hornet*, Lt(jg) Morrissey recorded that 'we awoke on 19 June to an ominously placid sea. The night had passed peacefully enough, but the morning despatches carried with them forebodings of busy and hectic hours ahead'.

By dawn on the 19th Adm Ozawa's Mobile Fleet was close enough to attack TF 58. However, before the IJN could launch its first strike, American submarines intervened. The previous day USS *Albacore* (SS-218), under the command of Lt Cdr James W Blanchard, had shifted from a position west of the Marianas to a point 100 miles further south. At 0745 hrs on 19 June *Albacore* upped periscope, at which point Blanchard found himself staring straight at the Japanese carrier group as it was in the act of launching its first strike! Allowing either *Zuikaku* or *Shōkaku* to pass him unharmed, he selected a third 'Shōkaku class' carrier as his target.

Taihō turned into wind at 0745 hrs to commence launching its strike – 16 A6M5 Zero-sen fighters, 17 D4Y3 'Judy' dive-bombers and nine

Naval Aviators from VF-2 man their F6F-3s aboard *Hornet* on the morning of 19 June 1944 – a day subsequently known as the 'Great Marianas Turkey Shoot'. 'Fighting Two' claimed 51 aerial victories on the 19th, placing it second behind VF-15 'Satan's Playmates' onboard *Essex*, which set the all-time American record of 68 victories in a day. Overall, the 15 fighter squadrons of TF 58 that engaged the IJNAF on 19 June put in claims for 330 aircraft shot down





Lt(jg) Daniel A Carmichael claimed eight victories with VF-2, including six during the Marianas campaign on 11 and 19 June 1944. Following his return to the USA in October 1944, he transferred to VBF-12 and made a second tour in 1945, scoring an additional four victories flying from *Randolph* during sweeps of Japan (US Navy)

Nakajima B6N2 ‘Jill’ torpedo-bombers. Just as he arrived in a firing position 5300 yards from *Taihō*, Blanchard discovered the Torpedo Data Computer had malfunctioned. Using his best judgement, he fired six torpedoes. As the strike formed up, Zero-sen pilot Sakio Kommatsu spotted the six torpedo wakes headed for the carrier. He dove at one, sacrificing himself to save his ship as the aeroplane and one of the torpedoes exploded. Four of the remaining five weapons passed *Taihō* without scoring. Blanchard then saw three Japanese destroyers turning toward him and he ordered *Albacore* to go deep. Just before the first of 35 depth charges arrived, one solid torpedo hit was heard.

The sixth torpedo hit *Taihō* on its starboard side just ahead of the island. The impact and explosion fractured the aviation fuel tanks and jammed the forward elevator between the flightdeck and upper hangar deck, stopping further flight operations. Within minutes its bow was down five feet and the forward elevator pit filled with a mixture of seawater, fuel oil and aviation gasoline. There was no fire and the flightdeck was unharmed. Ozawa ‘radiated confidence and satisfaction’ and ordered that the open elevator well be planked over in order to continue flight operations.

Aboard *Hornet* at 1000 hrs the first Japanese air strike was detected at a distance of 150 miles. The 64 aircraft heading for TF 58 had been launched from the three smallest Japanese carriers, *Chitose*, *Chiyoda* and *Zuikō*. ‘Fighting Two’ had already seen action that morning when ‘Tex’ Harris and future ace, and former Royal Canadian Air Force Spitfire pilot, Merriwell ‘Tex’ Vineyard (who had claimed a Bf 109 damaged in combat over Malta while serving with No 185 Sqn in June 1942) each downed a Zero-sen. The Naval Aviators had been aloft scouting for the fleet when their CAP was vectored onto the snoopers at 0745 hrs.

Cdr Dean led eight Hellcats off *Hornet*, having been ordered to climb to ‘Angels 25’ (25,000 ft) and intercept ‘100+’ enemy aircraft. Upon attaining that altitude the VF-2 pilots spotted the formation that had launched from *Taihō* instead and moved in to attack. Dean quickly downed a Zero-sen, while Danny Carmichael claimed two ‘Jills’ and a ‘Zeke’ to ‘make ace’. ‘Butch’ Voris, Davey Park, ‘Irish’ Harrigan, Mike Wolf and Bob Grimes also claimed single ‘Zeke’ victories.

Throughout TF 58 the fighter direction circuits filled with the ‘ancient battle cry’ for all hands to defend the American ‘circuit’, ‘Hey Rube!’ Divisions and sections of Hellcats fell on the advancing enemy aircraft. Men on the ships below could see aerial explosions and fiery trails of smoke tracing the sky on the horizon as the biggest aerial battle of the Pacific War began to play out.

Mike Wolf’s guns failed early on in the fight. Returning to the ship, he was jumped twice by Zero-sens and had to take violent evasive action to escape their attention. Separated from his wingman on the return flight, Cdr Dean was also jumped by several Zero-sens. ‘I was fighting for my life for almost an hour out there!’, Dean reported, eventually shooting down two and diving away from the others. Bob Grimes got in a fight with a ‘Zeke’ that hung doggedly to his tail, peppering the Hellcat before he got away. Leroy Robinson, who scored two ‘Zeke’ victories, was hit

hard during the fight and had to land his shot up Hellcat on the first carrier he spotted upon returning to the fleet, finally getting back to *Hornet* at the end of the day. VF-2's score for its first mission on 19 June was 12 destroyed without loss.

Shortly after the first group returned, a second 90-aeroplane contact was reported and all available fighters were launched. Ten Hellcats clawed into the sky, intercepting the inbound Japanese aircraft at between 17,000 ft and 23,000 ft, some 25 miles out from the fleet. Doherty, Van Haren and Redmond scored two each (giving the latter pilot ace status), while Zaeske and Carlson knocked down one each.

Hornet then launched a strike on Guam, targeting the airfields the IJNAF would be aiming to land at following their attacks on the fleet. This mission was led by future ace Lt William 'Hardluck' Blair, a VF-10 veteran. Intercepting the inbound Japanese,

Blair – who had gained his nickname from being scoreless despite numerous fights to date – knocked down two 'Judys'. Ens William Vaughan claimed three Zero-sens (he, arguably, suffered worse luck than Blair, for he ended the war with a score of four destroyed and three probables), 'Griff' Griffin two Zero-sens (to 'make ace') and 'Andy' Skon and Charlie Carroll (who also achieved ace status on this mission) two 'Judys' each. 'Porky' Connard and Myrvin Noble also claimed a Zero-sen apiece, while future ace Kenneth Lake downed a 'Val' for his first kill.

Carroll suffered wounds, however, when a 20 mm shell exploded in his cockpit, while Lake's Hellcat was so badly shot up it was shoved overboard as soon as he climbed out after landing. Finally, Connard's right wing was badly holed by flak over the island and collapsed as he touched down.

As all this was happening over the American fleet, at 1100 hrs the Japanese suffered a second submarine attack just as *Taihō* and the veteran carriers *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku* were preparing to launch Raid Three. At 1048 hrs the brand-new USS *Cavalla* (SS-244) raised its periscope in the midst of the formation, spotting *Shōkaku* as it brought fighters aboard from a CAP. *Cavalla* had first spotted the Mobile Fleet in the western Philippine Sea on 17 June, its reports providing the US Navy with the first concrete information that the Japanese carriers were indeed coming out to fight. At 1118 hrs Lt Cdr Herman Kossler fired a spread of six torpedoes from a range of 1200 yards at *Shōkaku*'s starboard side and registered three hits, before taking *Cavalla* deep to avoid destroyers – the first depth charge fell as hits were heard.

The torpedoes could not have been more damaging, hitting everything of value – avgas, magazines and machinery spaces. *Shōkaku* had just recovered aircraft and was fuelling others when the torpedoes exploded, igniting avgas that was flowing through pipes in the vicinity of the impacts. Nine aircraft exploded in the upper hangar, which was turned into chaos. Gas spewed from ruptured aircraft tanks and caught fire, while ammunition on hoists began to explode, turning the hangar into a blast furnace. The third torpedo struck a particularly vital point, destroying the electrical generating equipment forward of the boiler rooms, complicating



Amongst the 51 IJNAF aircraft credited to VF-2 on 19 June were three B6N 'Jill' torpedo-bombers. One was claimed by Lt(jg) Nolan Harrigan for his third, and last, victory, while two were credited to Lt(jg) 'Danny' Carmichael – the latter also downed a 'Zeke' during the same mission. This blurred print was taken from the gun camera film exposed by Carmichael, showing one of his 'Jills' trailing smoke after he had hit it with a burst of fire from his six 0.50-cal machine guns (US Navy)

the damage control efforts in the avgas storage and ammunition magazines. *Shōkaku* probably lost two boiler rooms instantly, with other fires burning forward of the engine spaces. The final hit in the bow destroyed its ability to maintain direction.

At first the ship's commanding officer, Capt Matsubara, thought the hits were not fatal and gave orders to launch aircraft. Before that could happen, however, the raging fires ignited an avgas main, sending up a fireball and burning spray that burst into the air ahead of the bridge. The burning aircraft in the hangar then set off ammunition and the hangar exploded – the pressure of the detonation lifted the elevators nearly three feet. The wrecked elevators fell back into the wells, dumping men standing on the forward elevator into the fires below. Explosions of bombs and aircraft fuel tanks added to the conflagration. The hangar fire became a raging inferno.

As the starboard boiler rooms rapidly flooded, the ship fell out of formation and began to list sharply to starboard. Spaces on the port side were counter-flooded to correct the list, but as damage control efforts overcompensated, *Shōkaku* heeled to port. Power failure made it impossible to run pumps and the blaze below deck prevented the armoured control booths in the hangar bay from being manned. In desperation, damage control teams formed bucket brigades. *Shōkaku* was now in extreme jeopardy.

Demonstrating discipline and professionalism, the remaining carriers executed their launches. By 1130 hrs Raids Three and Four were airborne and heading for TF 58. At 1145 hrs an inexperienced officer took over damage control on *Taihō*. Thinking the best way to handle the growing avgas fumes was to let them disperse by opening up the ship's ventilation system, his action instead filled the vessel with highly-volatile fumes. In the wake of this reckless action *Taihō* had become a floating time bomb.

By early afternoon the Japanese raids had begun to slow down, although no one on the American side knew why. The Zero-sens and 'Judys' of the 202nd Kokutai that reached TF58 from Yap were considered to be Raid Four by the Americans. WO Yoshida Katsuyoshi was one of only a few who survived to land on Guam.

At 1330 hrs the fires on *Shōkaku* ignited the fuel oil bunkers, with the flames spouting from the flightdeck and elevator wells being clearly visible from the other ships. The situation became hopeless when the forecabin was flooded. Reluctantly, Capt Matsubara bowed to the inevitable, ordering all hands on deck to abandon ship. Officers made a thorough check to be sure no one remained below. Several hundred crewmen gathered aft on the flightdeck and assembled for roll call. As *Shōkaku* settled by the bow, wreckage, bombs and burning aeroplanes in the hangar slid and bumped forward.

Catastrophe struck at 1408 hrs when an aerial bomb exploded in the forward hangar. Volatile avgas and fuel oil fumes were ignited. *Shōkaku* was rent by an ominous deep grumble, followed by four terrific explosions and then several smaller ones when the forward bomb and torpedo magazines were touched off. In a prolonged three-minute convulsion, *Shōkaku* blew apart at the seams. Screaming, trying frantically to grab anything to hold onto, the crew on the flightdeck slid down the incline, falling headlong through the blazing No 3 elevator into the roaring firestorm. In the water, horrified survivors were left with the unforgettable sight. Some 1263 members of the ship's company and 1st Air Flotilla

(601st Kokutai) perished, including Air Officer Mitsue Matsuda, who led the bombing raids that subdued Wake Island in December 1941. Of the six carriers that attacked Pearl Harbor two-and-a-half years earlier, only *Zuikaku* was left.

Aboard *Hornet*, a second mission was launched at 1440 hrs to the Orote Peninsula that resulted in VF-2's Ens Wilbur 'Spider' Webb making 'ace-in-a-day' with six 'Vals' destroyed, as described in detail in Chapter One. Lt Russ Reiserer almost matched Webb, claiming five 'Vals' destroyed in the same area. Although flying with VF-2, Reiserer was in fact the officer in charge of VF(N)-76's Detachment 2, charged with providing nightfighter cover for *Hornet*. On 19 June all available pilots had been pressed into service flying day fighters, hence Reiserer's participation in this mission. He had future VF(N)-76 ace Lt(jg) Fred Dungan (who was flying a brand new overall Glossy Sea Blue F6F-5 Hellcat that was assigned to CAG Arnold) and fellow nightfighter pilot Lt(jg) Bill Levering as his wingmen during this flight, and the former claimed a 'Kate' and a 'Zeke' destroyed and the latter a single 'Zeke'. Levering, whose fighter was badly shot up during the action, subsequently belly-landed back aboard *Hornet* and his aircraft was later jettisoned over the side.

As VF-2 turned for home, the IJN was in the process of suffering its second major loss of the battle. At 1530 hrs *Taihō* was jolted by an explosion caused by the spread of highly volatile fumes throughout the ship. The blast was so severe that a senior staff officer on the bridge saw the flightdeck heave as the sides blew out. *Taihō* began settling, clearly doomed. Adm Ozawa wanted to go down with the carrier, but his staff convinced him to abandon the vessel. Transferring his flag to the destroyer *Wakatsuki*, he then moved across to the cruiser *Haguro*. Shortly thereafter *Taihō* was rocked by a second thunderous explosion, and the carrier sank stern first, taking 1650 officers and men with it. US intelligence listed the ship as 'missing' until full information was obtained in late September that it had indeed been sunk by *Albacore*. The failure of American intelligence to discover the sinkings of *Taihō* and *Shōkaku* would play a major role in US decision-making for the rest of the year, adversely affecting its actions during the Pacific War's final carrier clash in October 1944, the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

With the return of the second strike force to *Hornet*, the day forever known thereafter as the 'Great Marianas Turkey Shoot' came to a close. 'Fighting Two' had scored 51 victories on 19 June, placing it second behind VF-15 'Satan's Playmates' aboard *Essex*, which set the all-time American record of 68 victories in a day – the 15 fighter squadrons of TF 58 put in claims for 330 aircraft shot down in total. Of the 373 'Zekes', 'Judys' and 'Jills' that Adm Ozawa had sent to attack the US fleet



VF(N)-76 Detachment 2 played its part on 19 June, claiming nine aircraft destroyed. Two of the aces to enjoy success that day were Lt Russ Reiserer (centre, standing) and Lt(jg) Fred Dungan (standing second from left), who downed seven aircraft between them. Ens 'Scoop' Levering (standing far right) also got a 'Val' on 19 June. Lt(jg) John Dear (standing far left) claimed three 'Kates' on 24 June whilst flying a VF-2 aircraft, and he went on to 'make ace' on 4 July (Russ Reiserer)



Lt(jg) Eugene D 'Red' Redmond took his tally to 7.25 kills when he downed a 'Jake' floatplane 'snooper' on the morning of 20 June. He subsequently scored one of VF-2's final aerial successes, over Manila Bay, on 20 September, taking his tally to 9.25 victories (US Navy)

from his carriers only 130 returned to their ships, many of which were then lost in the sinking of the two carriers. An additional 50 land-based aeroplanes had also been downed. US Navy losses were 23 aircraft to enemy fighters or flak, three on search missions and six operationally. The carrier air power of the IJNAF had suffered a mortal blow from which it would never recover. The US Navy had indeed comprehensively won what history would call the Battle of the Philippine Sea, but it did not know it at the time. The following morning would bring a final act.

For 'Fighting Two', 20 June began early, with search flights launched at 0530 hrs. The Japanese fleet was nowhere to be seen, but evidence that it was still out there was shown when Gene 'Red' Redmond and Arthur Van Haren each splashed an E13A 'Jake' floatplane (giving the latter pilot ace status), while 'Zesk' Zaeske nailed a B6N2 'Jill'. At 1330 hrs Lt Cdr Charlie Harbert led a search flight, during which two more 'Jills' were found and splashed but no enemy vessels were seen.

The Air Staff of Fifth Fleet was nearly in open revolt with fleet commander Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance as to what action the fleet should take. They had advocated on 18 June that TF 58 head west to intercept the Japanese before the invasion fleet was endangered. Spruance demurred, referring them to the order that the duty of his force was defence of the invasion itself, not destruction of the IJN fleet. He argued that if the carriers ventured too far away from the Marianas and the Japanese were successful with their expected shuttle strategy of striking while inbound to the islands, then again on the return trip to their carriers, the aerial defence of the invasion fleet would be compromised.

There was grumbling in the staff offices that things would be different if Halsey was in command, and indeed that difference would be demonstrated four months later in the Second Battle of the Philippine Sea (also known as the Battle of Leyte Gulf). Spruance, who had shown at Midway that he was an admiral who knew when to go 'all in' and when to 'hold 'em', always kept the larger mission in view. It was for this that Nimitz had chosen him over Halsey as the first commander of the fast carrier fleet.

Searches were flown all day on 20 June. Wherever the Japanese fleet was, it would be found at maximum range if found at all. The question was whether the IJN would be found in time to close the range and launch strikes with sufficient daylight left for the return flight, since only a few of the aviators in the fleet were qualified for night carrier landings. Spruance did agree to move west through the course of the day, given that the carriers would have to turn away from the enemy and into wind to launch their strikes, thereby adding to the distance to be flown.

Finally, at 1528 hrs, a search team of two TBFs from *Enterprise's* 'Torpedo Ten' found what everyone was looking for. Flying through afternoon squalls that reduced visibility, Lt Robert S Nelson spotted a ripple on the surface of the ocean. Lt(jg) Edward Laster, operating in the next search sector a few miles south, also saw the disturbance on the water and turned to investigate. The two Avengers approached from opposite sides of a large squall to see something almost no aviator then serving in TF 58 had observed before – the Mobile Fleet. Nelson broke radio silence to make the first report, sending it twice to ensure reception. Unfortunately, his report positioned the Japanese vessels 60 miles closer to TF 58 than they really were. At 1600 hrs he corrected the report.

Naval Aviators and sailors alike aboard the US carriers far to the east immediately went into action, realising that time and fading daylight were against them. VF-2's 'Connie' Hargreaves recalled;

'CAG-2 contributed 12 fighters to escort 12 dive-bombers and nine torpedo-bombers. Even the fighters were loaded with a 500-lb bomb each for maximum striking power, since this was the first time a Japanese carrier fleet had come out since October 1942. We could always jettison the bombs in the event that we ran into enemy aeroplanes.'

When the order for pilots to man their aeroplanes echoed across *Hornet's* flightdeck at 1545 hrs, Lt(jg) Jack 'Dad' Taylor reflected for a moment as he strapped into his SB2C-1C Helldiver that today was his 23rd birthday, and what a birthday present he had just received. He was second section leader to the senior division leader, Lt Cdr Hal Buell. As aeroplanes were pushed into position for launch, the enemy's new location was broadcast. Pilots who were already worried about the distance they had to cover to reach the IJN fleet, and their ability to get back from such a mission, now marked the Japanese vessels beyond the range circles on their plotting boards. Taylor recalled, 'We took off and made a running rendezvous at low altitude, heading 285 degrees, with the distance to the Japanese being 230 miles'.

Pilots leaned their mixtures and reduced their revs, stretching every possible mile out of their fuel tanks as they slowly began the climb to attack altitude. Pilots and gunners slid their canopies closed to clean up the aeroplanes and save fuel. Taylor's wingman, Ens Ralph Yaussi, did not see any way they could fly the mission and return, but he held position on his section leader nevertheless. 'We went west, and we went, and we went some more. Several times someone thought they saw the fleet ahead, but it turned out to be cloud shadows on the ocean', Yaussi recalled. The sun got lower and lower on the western horizon as 95 Hellcats, 54 Avengers, 51 Helldivers and 26 Dauntlesses from three task groups flew on. 'Connie' Hargreaves remembered the mission;

'The pilots of "Fighting Two" flew out to the sighting area, but there were no Japanese carriers there. The CAG ordered us to press on, beyond the safe turn-around point. Finally, just as the sun was setting, we spotted the Jap fleet. There was no aerial opposition, just heavy flak. Bill Dean took his division in first, then my division commenced our dives. After releasing our bombs we tried to form up, but the darkness was absolute.'

Ens Yaussi explained that 'the Japanese ships were firing what looked like solid flak. It appeared that the sky was covered with gunfire that could not be penetrated without being hit. The smoke was in beautiful colours and patterns, pink and blue and white, and the smoke plumes were spread over huge plots of sky. It was scary'.

Division leader Hal Buell asked the CO of 'Bombing Two', Lt Cdr Grafton Campbell, for permission to dive first. As Yaussi remembered, 'I wished at that time he hadn't done that. Later he explained to me that he wanted us to go in before they had a chance to get their guns sighted properly'. *Hornet's* bombers dove on the largest carrier they saw below, which they thought was the now-sunk *Shôkaku*, but it turned out to be its sister-ship *Zuikaku*. The Helldivers pulled out low over the water from their dives, jinking wildly as they fled through the heavy AA fire of battleships, cruisers and destroyers to make their escape.



Warships of the Mobile Fleet manoeuvre to avoid dive- and torpedo-bomber attacks by aircraft from TF 58 during the late afternoon of 20 June – the large ship at the top of the photograph is the carrier *Zuikaku*, which was hit by the Helldivers. Flying a beyond-maximum-range mission, the Naval Aviators had found the IJN vessels at sunset (US Navy)

‘Connie’ Hargreaves dropped his 500-lb bomb on a cruiser;

‘I think that dive was about the longest I ever made, if not in altitude, then certainly in the time I spent watching my own tracers and trying to distinguish them from all the flak that was coming up at me. It seemed like the point of release for that bomb I had been loaded with would never arrive, even though I had the guns going in short bursts all the way down.’

The four Hellcats of his division reformed away from the enemy

and set course to the east in the gathering darkness;

‘There was no moon, no light reflecting off the clouds, just our instruments and the running lights of other aeroplanes. We faced sheer darkness for flying on instruments in and around the clouds. It was a precarious and very scary flight back to our carriers.’

Ralph Yaussi also recalled the return flight. ‘I initially found myself alone when I headed for home. Then I saw another aeroplane and tried to join up on him, but he ran from me after apparently thinking I was an enemy. I did not want to expend the fuel to catch him up and flew on alone’. After awhile Yaussi found two more Helldivers from ‘Bombing Two’, flown by his leader Hal Buell and Dave Stear. ‘We flew along together for some time and felt that we were not going in the right direction. I communicated through Dave my fears, and said that if we didn’t change course I was going to leave’. Buell convinced Yaussi to stick with them as they turned 2.5 degrees to starboard – half of what Yaussi suggested. ‘We arrived just to the left of the fleet, but it was still in sight’.

Throughout the return flight the pilots heard radio calls from aeroplanes that could not make it. Entire divisions and sections ditched together in the hope of surviving in the open sea as a group. Individuals called out of the darkness to friends to remember them to their loved ones. ‘Connie’ Hargreaves recounted;

‘As we flew on and on in that pitch darkness I began to question my navigation, for it seemed like we should have found our own carriers a long time ago. But checking my watch indicated that we still had more than half-an-hour to go before we should be sighting the wakes of our task group, if we had been lucky and plotted our navigation correctly to the Point Option of the moving carriers. All the plotting had to be done in the dull glow of a red-lens flashlight, which was used to help preserve night vision. As I thought about possible navigation errors, I leaned my fuel mixture a little more, watching to make sure that the cylinder head temperatures didn’t go beyond acceptable limits.’

It was now nearing 2015 hrs as the surviving aircraft droned east in the darkness. Radar operators in the combat information centres aboard the carriers began seeing contacts on their screens. In the four hours since launch, the fleet had moved 90 miles west. At 2030 hrs TF 58 reversed course to the east and cranked its speed up to 20 knots. Simultaneously,

CAG-2's Task Group Commander, Rear Admiral 'Jocko' Clark, hearing the panic in the voices of his airmen over the airwaves, ordered his carriers to turn on their brightest beams. Cruisers were ordered to fire star shells. Unprompted, the screening destroyers turned their searchlights on the carriers. Realising that Clark's force was lit like a carnival, Vice Admiral Mitscher gave the famous order 'Turn on the lights'. The low clouds above reflected the searchlights onto the sea below.

'Butch' Voris was the first to land on *Hornet*, followed by 'Stinky' Davis. After that it was one barrier crash after another as pilots who had never landed on a carrier at night attempted to get back aboard. Jack Taylor remembered, 'I got back at 2100 hrs with less than 50 gallons of fuel. *Hornet's* deck was fouled with a crash. We made four passes but were waved off each time'. He told his gunner to get the raft ready and prepare for a water landing. 'After the fourth pass I pulled the wheels up and flew straight ahead till the engine quit, then ditched. Luckily it was a calm sea so the landing was abrupt, but upright. We both got in the raft and, as the night was a dark one, we fired our pistols loaded with tracers to indicate our position'. After about 30 minutes in the raft Taylor and his gunner were picked up by USS *Bradford* (DD-545).

Ralph Yaussi recalled;

'We were directed to land on any carrier available. The radio transmissions were chaotic, everyone was talking and therefore no one could be understood. We got in the landing pattern and I went around three times. I was low on fuel, so each time I was waved off I retracted my landing gear. On the third approach I was coming in fine when they shined a light and saw my wheels were still retracted so I got a waveoff.'

Yaussi told radioman Jim Curry that if they did not make the next pass they would have to ditch. No sooner had he said that than the engine cut out. From an altitude of 100 ft they settled onto the waves quickly. The pilot and gunner struggled free, launched their raft and climbed aboard. After several minutes in the water, Yaussi managed to find and fire his Very pistol. USS *Anthony* (DD-515) spotted them and picked them up.

Although 'Connie' Hargreaves managed to get back aboard *Hornet*, his adventure was not yet over. 'Finally the deck cleared, and I got a chance to land without another waveoff. I picked up the LSO as I turned in for final. I got a Roger Pass all the way in to the cut and landed without incident via the No 4 wire'. Hargreaves taxied out of the arresting gear and was directed to park 50 ft in front of the No 5 barrier – the last one still useable after all the crashes that night. Having folded the wings of his fighter, he climbed out, then remembered he had left his plotting board in the cockpit.

'My plane captain suddenly dropped everything and ran to starboard, away from me – for good reason, too! He had glanced back in time to see another Hellcat come barrelling up the flightdeck, missing all the landing wires and heading straight for us. For the next few seconds my heart was in my mouth, for I didn't really have any place to go in a hurry. Fortunately, the No 5 barrier slowed the Hellcat and jerked it onto a course crossing to port. It missed my aeroplane by inches but struck another Hellcat, which forced it further to the left until it slid over the side of the deck and landed on top of the forward port quad 40 mm anti-aircraft gun mount.'

Its pilot was newly promoted CAG Cdr Jack Arnold, who had little air time in the F6F and only a few Hellcat carrier landings even in daylight.



On the night of 20 July VF-2's Lt(jg) 'Connie' Hargreaves narrowly escaped death after returning from the 'Mission Beyond Darkness'. Having landed safely and climbed out of his Hellcat, he then went back to his fighter to retrieve his plotting board. At that moment CAG Jackson Arnold missed the arrestor wires on landing in his fighter and crashed to a halt just feet away from Hargreaves' aeroplane. After not seeing an enemy fighter in seven months of combat, Hargreaves became an 'ace in a day' during two missions over Iwo Jima on 24 June (US Navy)

No fewer than 28 of the pilots seen in this VF-2 group shot during the unit's 1943-44 combat tour aboard *Enterprise* and *Hornet* became aces. A two-thirds life size print of this photograph, taken shortly after TF 58 had defeated the IJNAF in the skies over the Marianas, was used as part of a US Navy recruiting exhibition staged in the Radio City Music Hall in New York City during the summer of 1944. The four individuals standing in the centre of the front row are Cdr Bill Dean, Rear Admiral 'Jocko' Clark, Capt William Sample and Lt 'Butch' Voris (US Navy)

The 20 June 1944 raid, dubbed the 'Mission Beyond Darkness' was at last over. Of the 230 aircraft launched, only 115 returned to their carriers. Twenty were lost to flak over the Japanese fleet and the remainder fell victim to fuel starvation. Fortunately, over the next few days the aeroplanes and destroyers of TF 58 were able to scour the vast expanse of the Philippine Sea and rescue the majority of the downed aircrew. The strike force had succeeded in sinking the carrier *Hiyō* and two tankers, whilst *Zuikaku*, *Junyō* and *Chiyoda* were damaged by bombs, as was the battleship *Haruna*. The IJNAF lost more than 100 aircraft as a result of the attack.

Over the two days of the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the Japanese had lost 433 carrier aircraft and a further 200 from land-based units. The IJNAF had spent a year rebuilding its carrier air groups, and TF 58 had destroyed 90 percent of them in just two days. 'Fighting Two's' contribution in this one-sided fight was the downing of 115 enemy aircraft in just 48 hours. The losses suffered by the Japanese proved to be irreplaceable.

On Guam on 22 June WO Yoshida Katsuyoshi recorded in his diary, 'Day by day, the situation on Saipan grows steadily worse, and here on Guam we fighter units have lost nearly all of our usable machines due to combat actions and the ceaseless night and day bombing by the enemy. We have no spare time for repairs, which had left us with only two serviceable Zeros. They are guarded the way a tiger guards its cubs'. Both of these aircraft were destroyed the following evening.

On the night of 24 June a Japanese Army Air Force (JAAF) Mitsubishi Ki-21 'Sally' bomber arrived at Orote airfield from Iwo Jima. Katsuyoshi convinced the pilot, a young captain, to take the eight surviving pilots of the 202nd Kokutai aboard prior to its departure back to Iwo Jima. During the night flight out of Guam, the malaria that had previously seen Yoshida Katsuyoshi grounded for many months returned with a vengeance, and when the aircraft arrived at Yap he was admitted directly into hospital.



PACIFIC HIGH TIDE

With the Marianas campaign completed as far as fighting off a Japanese attack was concerned, the fast carriers of TF 58 returned to their Pacific rampage. First on the agenda was unfinished business at Iwo Jima.

On the evening of 22 June TG 58.1, having spent 21 and 22 June rescuing aviators who had gone down at sea during 'The Mission Beyond Darkness', was ordered to return to Eniwetok to refuel and rearm. Rear Admiral 'Jocko' Clark, the most aggressive carrier task group commander, decided to detour north en route and hit Iwo Jima a second time, with a dawn strike on 24 June.

After four aborted attempts to weather fierce storms, the 30 replacement Zero-sens of the Yokosuka Kokutai had finally made it to Iwo Jima on the afternoon of 23 June. With the airfield's runway packed with 110 aircraft, they managed to set down on a mountainside path without any of the neophyte pilots damaging their aeroplanes. Soldiers stared in disbelief as the Zero-sens taxied past in column, navigating the mountain path in fog to finally arrive at the airfield, where they joined the remaining IJNAF aircraft that had flown in over the previous 24 hours.

At 0520 hrs on 24 June Saburo Sakai and his pilots were alerted to the presence of American aircraft by the sounding of an alarm. The radar station on Iwo Jima had detected the US Navy strike force heading inbound to the island, resulting in 80 pilots racing for their fighters, hastily taking off and climbing for altitude. WO Kaneyoshi Muto, after Sakai the leading ace of the group, led 42 Zero-sens through a break in the clouds, climbing into the dawn light.

Fifteen Hellcats of 'Fighting Two', led by Lt Robert R Butler, spotted Mount Suribachi in the distance through the clouds. Other Hellcats from *Yorktown*, *Belleau Wood* and *Bataan* were also inbound through the cloudy sky. Suddenly, the 42 Zero-sens flying with Muto burst out of the clouds, diving on the Hellcat formations below them. A swirling dogfight quickly developed, Muto diving on a section of Hellcats and flaming both of them, before going after a third fighter and setting it aflame too. He then turned into a fourth F6F and set its engine afire.

While a veteran like Muto could indeed show American Naval Aviators what a trained Japanese pilot was capable of, his performance was notable by its singularity. The majority of the 'Zeke' pilots engaged over Iwo Jima that day were little more than flying targets.

As the Hellcats of 'Fighting Two' tangled with the enemy, Bob Butler flamed three in succession, 'Kid' Lake shot down two, Roy O'Neal, R W Shackford, 'Blood' Doner and 'Stinky' Davis claimed three and 'Connie' Hargreaves and 'Tex' Vineyard scored four each in the fast-moving fight – both Vineyard and Doner 'made ace' with these victories. Hargreaves, who had not even seen an enemy aeroplane during all the combat missions he had flown since January, remembered the fight. 'The enemy pilots didn't show a lot of skill. I found a flight of four and just worked from tail-end Charlie to the leader, without any of them taking any evasive

Lt Landis E 'Blood' Doner 'made ace' with three 'Zekes' destroyed west of Iwo Jima during an early morning sweep on 24 June – he had claimed two victories 13 days earlier. Doner's score stood at eight when VF-2 ended its combat tour (US Navy)



action'. Hargreaves then spotted a fifth Zero-sen and opened fire on it. As the smoking fighter fell away, he was forced to take evasive action against others, and was thus unable to confirm a fifth victory.

Below the clouds, Sakai endeavoured to lead his 40 Zero-sens in a surprise attack on the American fighters but he was in turn bounced by a number of Hellcats that appeared out of the clouds. Sakai manoeuvred away as the F6Fs fastened onto the tails of his neophyte pilots. He suddenly realised just what a disadvantage he was at with only one good eye, as he momentarily lost sight of the fight. Spotting a formation of aeroplanes in the near distance, Sakai flew toward them, thinking that they were Zero-sens. He was too close to turn away when he suddenly realised they were Hellcats. In a fight that became legendary, Sakai proved his still-superior flying skill as he eluded every attack by the American fighters for more than 20 minutes. As he recalled after the war;

'The first Grumman tried to match the turn with me. For just that moment I needed, his underside filled the range finder and I squeezed out a burst. The cannon shells exploded along the fuselage. The next second, thick clouds of black smoke poured back from the aeroplane and it went into a wild, uncontrolled dive for the sea.

'At least a half-dozen Grummans were on my tail, their wings sparkling flame as they opened fire. Another left roll – fast! The six fighters ripped past my wing and zoomed in climbing turns to the right. I slammed the throttle into overboost and rolled right. The Zero-sen closed the distance rapidly. Fifty yards away, I opened up with the cannon, watching shells move up the fuselage and disappear into the cockpit. Bright flashes and smoke appeared beneath the glass and the Hellcat swerved crazily and fell off on one wing trailing a growing smoke plume.'

The two downed Hellcats marked Sakai's 63rd and 64th victories since he had claimed his first successes over Hankow, China, in October 1938. The fight, however, was not over. Sakai was boxed in. As he twisted and turned, never stopping his manoeuvres, the F6Fs broke in divisions and sections to come in at him, only to be disappointed as he flicked away. After several minutes of this, Sakai realised the American pilots were not as good as their aeroplanes. Angered by their clumsy attempts to get him, he turned on one division that came at him and attacked them head on. The leader fell away smoking, but the other three were quickly on him. Sakai only escaped by throwing his fighter into a spin and falling into a huge cumulus cloud, where he was suddenly in fear for his life as the thunderstorm shook the Zero-sen. The manoeuvre gave him precious seconds while the Hellcat pilots thought they had downed him.

Falling out of the cloud and recovering, Sakai found himself alone in the sky. Exhausted from the effort of the fight, he headed back to the island and landed. The mechanics who swarmed over the Zero-sen were astonished to find that not one bullet had hit him. Unfortunately for the Yokosuka Kokutai, the same could not be said for the rest of the group. Of the 80 pilots who took off that morning, only 30 returned from the fight with the Americans.

Two hours later a VF-2 CAP intercepted a formation of torpedo-bombers that were searching for the task force 70 miles from Iwo Jima. Although identified as B5N 'Kates', they were almost certainly the veteran aircraft's more modern replacement, the B6N 'Jill'. In either case, they

were no match for 'Fighting Two', which shot a number of them down. Two fell to 'Gabe' Gabriel (who also downed a 'Zeke' later in the day) and LeRoy Robinson, both attaining ace status with these victories, and one was claimed by Myrvin Noble to make him an ace as well.

During the late afternoon a second squadron of torpedo-bombers was sent out to find and attack the American fleet, the B6N 'Jills' this time having a Zero-sen escort. Spotted on radar, the American CAP caught them before they could get close enough to make an attack. Among the pilots who claimed a victory was 'Connie' Hargreaves, whose solitary 'Zeke' made him yet another VF-2 pilot to become an 'ace in a day', albeit in his case over two missions. Squadronmate Ens 'Robbie' Robinson came close to matching Hargreaves' achievement with a 'Kate' (almost certainly a 'Jill') and a 'Zeke' during the afternoon interception following two 'Zekes' during the early morning sweep. Robert W Shackford, who had bagged three 'Zekes' in the early sweep, claimed a fourth 'Zeke' that afternoon to take him to ace status too. Finally, veteran Naval Aviator 'Butch' Voris took his tally to five victories during the afternoon 'turkey shoot', downing two 'Zekes' – his first success had come with VF-10 during the defence of Guadalcanal in November 1942.

On 24 June VF-2 set a new record by claiming 67 victories, which was just one short of VF-15's 68 five days earlier. 'Fighting Two' had now scored 187 victories since entering combat, making it the leading fighter squadron in the US Navy at that time. It also had a faster scoring rate than any other VF unit to date. Despite a number of claims by the IJNAF on the 24th, VF-2 suffered just one loss – Lt(jg) Conard Elliott, who was shot down by a Zero-sen. Given that Muto and Sakai were the only Japanese pilots known to have scored that day, one of them had likely been the victor. Elliott was one of the most popular pilots in 'Fighting Two', remembered as much for his personal kindness as for his daring as a Naval Aviator.

Rear Admiral Clark turned the task group east at dusk on 24 June, and it dropped anchor in Eniwetok Atoll on the 28th. After a quick turnaround, the ships headed back to Iwo Jima in company with Rear Admiral William K Harrill's TG 58.4. While the latter's vessels slowed in order to celebrate Independence Day, the aggressive Clark pushed on and struck Iwo Jima 24 hours earlier. Cdr Dean led a 60-aeroplane sweep from the task group, which included 15 F6Fs from VF-2. A large formation of 'Zekes' was engaged north of Iwo Jima, and 'Connie' Hargreaves and John Banks led the way with three victories apiece – the latter 'made ace' with his trio of claims. Byron Johnson and 'Andy' Skon were credited with two each to also secure ace status. Overall, TG 58.2 was credited with 33 victories during the 3 July mission, the majority of these aircraft being reinforcements flown in by the IJNAF since the strike of 24 June. VF-2 did not escape unscathed, however, as Bob Butler and Roy O'Neal were listed as missing in action after they failed to return from the mission. Yokosuka Kokutai aces WO Kaneyoshi Muto and Ens Matsuo Hagiri claimed three Hellcat victories each.

On 4 July both TGs 58.2 and 58.4 participated in a coordinated attack on the islands, with *Hornet's* CAG-2 attacking Chichi Jima. During the mission, 'Torpedo Two' pilot Ken Glass found an enemy destroyer and attacked it with rockets. As he pulled off his attack run the ship exploded.



One of VF-2's youngest pilots (he was born in December 1923), Ens Leroy W 'Robbie' Robinson also attained ace status on 24 June when he claimed two 'Kates' (almost certainly 'Jills') destroyed from a formation that had been intercepted by the VF-2 CAP whilst searching for TG 58.1. These victories proved to be Robinson's final aerial successes (US Navy)



Lt(jg) John L 'Jack' Banks claimed two 'Zekes' destroyed and two as probables west of Iwo Jima on 24 June. Three 'Zekes' shot down on 3 July north-northwest of Iwo Jima made him an ace, and by the end of VF-2's combat tour his score had risen to 8.5 victories (US Navy)

'Prep Charlie Left' – a pair of SB2C-3s from VB-3 bank left over *Hornet* as they enter the landing pattern in August 1944. Below the dive-bombers, a handful of Hellcats share the bow area of CV-12's flightdeck with Avengers from VT-2 (US Navy)



The following day both task forces withdrew to refuel as the sea had become too heavy for further air strikes to be safely launched and recovered. On the 6th, with no serviceable fighters left on Iwo Jima for them to fly, the surviving pilots of the Yokosuka Kokutai (including a dysentery-stricken Saburo Sakai) were evacuated back to Japan aboard a transport aircraft.

Hornet and its task group subsequently returned to the Marianas and flew strikes against Guam, which was scheduled for invasion at the end of the month. By this point there was no aerial activity by the IJNAF over the islands, and CAG-2's activity was confined to ground attack. The main threat encountered by VF-2 was flak, which was also lessening as the Hellcat pilots found and bombed AA sites, although aircraft continued to return with flak damage. Several 'Fighting Two' pilots later landed on Saipan, where they purchased 'souvenirs' from US Army and US Marine Corps troops, including 'Japanese' flags that were later determined to be the product of 'Army handicrafts'! Samurai swords and Japanese pistols also started appearing aboard ship, and most weapons were swiftly confiscated. Orders were soon given that there would be no more 'shopping trips' to the island.

The weather worsened after the middle of the month following the arrival of the monsoon season, with low clouds, squalls and rain putting a crimp in flight operations. Strikes increased to three a day on 17 July, and then four on the 19th and six the following day as the Guam invasion date was pushed forward to 21 July. John Searcy and Don Brandt finally returned to the squadron on the 23rd after they spotted a *Hornet* TBM on Isley Field and were duly flown back to the ship.

On 24 July the task group departed Guam to strike the Lesser Carolines, hitting Ulithi, Yap and Corol islands on the 25th. Forty aircraft were spotted on Yap and thoroughly strafed in a sweep led by Charlie Harbert. The task group then turned north and struck the Bonins on 4 and 5 August. Although no aerial opposition was encountered, VF-2 participated in an attack on a five-ship convoy that was found near Chichi Jima. A further ten ships were targeted in the island's harbour, and a solitary TBM was shot down by AA during the attack – its crew was rescued, however.

On the morning of 5 August the VF-2 CAP was vectored north to chase down a Japanese snooper. 'Kid' Lake duly shot down an H8K 'Emily' 200 miles south of Honshu for his fifth victory. That afternoon, Dick Combs also downed an 'Emily' for his only aerial success. Other than these flying boats, no other Japanese aircraft were encountered during the strikes. Following an afternoon sweep of the islands that found no worthwhile targets left, TF 58.2 turned southeast and headed back to Eniwetok.

The longest and most successful carrier campaign yet waged during

the Pacific War had been successfully concluded with the destruction the IJNAF and the final crippling of the Japanese carrier fleet. The invasion and liberation of Saipan, Tinian and Guam set the stage for the final aerial assault on Japan itself, which would commence that autumn with the arrival of Boeing B-29 Superfortresses.

On 6 August *Hornet's* Capt Sample received news that he had been promoted to rear admiral, and that his replacement would be Capt Austin K Doyle. The latter assumed command of the carrier on 8 August, and he helmed the vessel for the rest of the war. Sample was remembered by CAG-2 for being 'a

fearless leader whose thoughts were always for those in his charge. He proved himself a real friend to the carrier air group'. In an awards ceremony following the change of command, Lt(jg) 'Andy' Skon received the Navy Cross for his role on the night of 'Butch' O'Hare's loss in November 1943, while Cdr Dean received the DFC for his leadership of 'Fighting Two' in the battles on 11 and 20 June 1944. After the war, 'Connie' Hargreaves recalled Dean's leadership of VF-2;

'Cdr Bill Dean could have been a very high-scoring pilot had he taken all the flights when opposition was anticipated. But he always tried to keep the scores for all his pilots as even as possible, not catering to a favoured few as some of the other fighter squadron skippers did. Often, Bill took assignments for the CAP or bomber escort instead of leading all the fighter sweeps. That gave us all an opportunity to get into action. Thus, "Fighting Two" had 28 aces in our one tour of duty – a US Navy record that still stands.'

On 14 August Dean and eight other pilots took the 'flyable duds' among the squadron's Hellcats to Majuro for replacement. They returned five days later with new F6F-5 Hellcats, resplendent in overall Glossy Sea Blue. These machines looked very different from the sun-faded F6F-3s in their 'tri-colour' camouflage of Sea Blue, Intermediate Blue and White that they had replaced. Initially, the new Hellcats were distributed to division and section leaders, to be operated alongside the older aircraft. However, it was soon determined during the three-day shakedown cruise that commenced on 20 August that the new Hellcats had a performance edge that made it difficult for the older F6Fs to keep up in combat manoeuvres. Thus, divisions were equipped with one or the other of the two Hellcat models.

On 24 August CAG-2 received word that its replacement, in the form of CAG-11, had arrived in Hawaii. After nearly four continuous months of combat operations with no real break other than a few weeks at anchorage at locations that allowed the men only an opportunity to sit on a tropical beach and drink warm beer, the aircrew were ready to return home. Before the switch could take place, however, the fast carriers



A newly delivered F6F-5 goes tail-up after it hit the barrier, its pilot having failed to hook an arrestor wire when landing. The Hellcat was so tough that the pilot could walk away from crashes that literally tore the aeroplane to pieces. This particular machine would have been quickly repaired, however. 'Dash Fives' started to reach VF-2 in significant numbers from mid August 1944 (US Navy)



This F6F-5 suffered terminal damage to the rear fuselage in a heavy landing – note the wrinkling in the skinning aft of the cockpit. The fighter would have been immediately struck below, where the airframe was stripped of all useable parts before being pushed over the side (US Navy)

departed for a series of operations that would culminate in the invasion of the Philippines on 20 October. This date had finally been agreed upon during a conference in Pearl Harbor between President Franklin D Roosevelt, Adm Chester Nimitz and Gen Douglas MacArthur.

The US Navy had favoured bypassing the Philippines altogether and taking Formosa instead, which could in turn provide airfields from which USAAF bombers could strike at targets in both enemy-held China and Japan itself. However, there were not enough troops in the Pacific to mount such an invasion. Roosevelt was also concerned that

MacArthur would resign his position as Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Southwest Pacific if he was not allowed to make good his 1942 promise that 'I shall return' to the Philippines, and instead seek the Republican nomination for President in the elections that autumn. Thus, the major American offensive was aimed at the Philippines, the liberation of which did not really affect the ultimate outcome of the war.

Also at this time Vice Admiral Spruance and his Fifth Fleet staff relinquished command, being replaced by Vice Admiral William 'Bull' Halsey. Under the latter's command the fleet was designated Third Fleet and TF 58 became TF 38. The unusual split command structure implemented by Adm Nimitz was intended to confuse the Japanese and create a higher tempo of operations. While Spruance was at sea leading the fleet, Halsey and his staff would be planning Third Fleet's next series of operations. Spruance and Halsey were as unlike as the US Army's Gens Omar Bradley and George Patton in Europe. While Spruance always deferred any personal glory-seeking to the overall demands of larger strategy, as did Bradley, Halsey was in the Patton mould – more daring and offensive-minded, and willing to take higher casualties as he combined an urge for victory with personal reputation.

Halsey had chafed as he watched his former subordinate assume command of the fleet when he himself had been taken ill with severe dermatitis in May 1942 and lead it to victory at Midway, following that success with the recent victory in the Philippine Sea. Halsey was determined to make his personal mark – an attitude that would come close to causing an enormous defeat in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, when he failed to keep in mind his responsibility to defend the invasion forces when he took the bait and went after Japanese carriers so depleted they had been sent into battle to lure him away from the invasion forces. During its brief time left in the western Pacific, CAG-2 would experience this difference in command outlook very directly.

On 25 August Vice Admiral Mitscher came aboard *Hornet* to decorate members of CAG-2. No fewer than 28 'Fighting Two' pilots were awarded

DFCs, with 12 awarded a second DFC for actions during the deployment since early April.

Four days later, at 0630 hrs, the fast carriers of TF 38 departed Eniwetok and headed for the Palaus. Securing the islands as an advanced base was at the time determined to be necessary for the coming operations in the Philippines. *Hornet*, along with the fleet carriers USS *Wasp* (CV-18) and USS *Hancock* (CV-19), accompanied by the light carriers USS *Cowpens* (CVL-25) and USS *Monterey* (CVL-26), formed TG 38.1 under the command of Vice Admiral John S McCain.

On 6 September, while CAG-2 made plans for strikes on the Palaus, to commence the following morning, news arrived that CAG-11 had departed Pearl Harbor and was heading to Eniwetok. The Naval Aviators of CAG-2 now knew that the end of their combat tour was in sight, but that they still had to pass through the gauntlet of combat one more time against difficult targets in the Philippines.

The first strike departed *Hornet* at 0430 hrs on 7 September, headed for Angaur. Three missions were flown during the day, with both Angaur and Ngesibus islands being struck. A division formed of Charlie Carroll, Jack Vaughn, 'Razor' Blaydes and 'Randy' Carlson that was assigned to take photographs of the morning strike suffered the loss of Carlson to flak. At this point all losses were felt keenly as men looked forward to returning home, but Carlson's demise was a hard blow to take for he had been one of the original members of the 'new' VF-2, and the first to claim a kill for the squadron – he had four victories to his name by the time of his death.

After a second day of strikes on 8 September, TF 38 headed for the Philippines, with the southernmost island of Mindanao as the target. According to MacArthur's plan for the liberation of the Philippines, Mindanao had to be seized first. All four task groups of TF 38 were duly involved in the strikes, which targeted airfields on the island from 9 to 11 September.

Although no Japanese aircraft were encountered during the Mindanao raids, this would change from the 12th when CAG-2 started flying sweeps over Leyte. VF-2 now encountered JAAF fighters for the first time – admittedly a handful of 'Tojos' had been claimed during the early stages of the summer campaign, but these had almost certainly been misidentified Zero-sens. Conversely, during the fighting over the Philippines, Naval Aviators unfamiliar with JAAF aircraft frequently claimed to have downed IJNAF types of similar configuration. For example, the Nakajima Ki-43



An aviation ordnanceman prepares to load 100-lb fragmentation bombs onto VF-2 Hellcats. These weapons were effective against AA positions during pre-strike strafing missions. Note the spinning propeller of a Hellcat in the background – working on the flightdeck was always dangerous (US Navy)



Ens Richard B 'Razor' Blaydes became VF-2's 25th ace when he downed a 'Zeke' near Negros Island on 12 September. He was flying as the wingman to CAG Arnold at the time, the latter also claiming a 'Zeke' victory (US Navy)

Lt Arthur Van Haren recovers aboard *Hornet* after suffering an in-flight emergency on 12 September. He recorded in his diary, 'I took off today and almost immediately my aeroplane started throwing oil and then started smoking to high heaven. I was carrying a 500-lb bomb, and that worried me no end because I couldn't get rid of it. The ship told me to land anyway, so I did, and my old luck held right out. Just as I hit the deck, the engine burst into flames, but I wasted no time getting out of the darn thing.' Van Haren flew a mission later that afternoon, claiming his final victory (US Navy)

Hayabusa, known to the Allies as the 'Oscar', was often mistaken for the Zero-sen, while examples of the Ki-21 'Sally' were claimed as G4M 'Bettys'. However, other JAAF types that were encountered by VF-2 such as the obsolete Nakajima Ki-27 'Nate' and the inline-engined Kawasaki Ki-61 'Tony' had no IJNAF equivalents, and were thus easily identified by the F6F pilots that shot them down.

Ultimately, the fact that there were no IJNAF aircraft in the southern Philippines at this time confirms that all claims made during this campaign were in reality for JAAF aircraft.

On 12 September the campaign shifted to the central Philippines, with the first sweep over Leyte and the several large airfields that were sited there. While escorting Helldivers and Avengers on the first mission, Charlie Harbert spotted an 'Oscar' he misidentified as a 'Zeke' over Cebu, which he chased and shot down for his first victory. The Ki-43s stayed to fight, and seven more victories were claimed in an engagement that lasted only four minutes. Lt(jg) Clyde 'Spit' Spitler was credited with four, thus making him VF-2's 24th ace, two more (one of which was claimed as an 'Irving', but was surely a Kawasaki Ki-45 'Nick') were claimed by Lt David 'Beetle' Berrey and one each went to Lt 'Bernie' McLaughlin and Ens Thomas C Tillar. 'Andy' Skon chased a Ki-45 that managed to land before he could finish shooting it down. Tillar had the oil line of his Hellcat severed during the engagement, forcing him to ditch east of Leyte and swim ashore. He was rescued by a Curtiss SOC Seagull biplane floatplane that had been led to Tillar's location by 'Andy' Skon.

A second strike went to Negros Island at 1310 hrs, where it strafed Alicante airfield. The eight VF-2 fighters involved in the mission succeeded in downing six JAAF fighters, all of which were misidentified as 'Zekes' or 'Hamps'. Aces 'Barney' Barnard, Byron Johnson and newly promoted Lt Arthur Van Haren claimed single victories, as did CAG Arnold – his first, and only, aerial success. Ens Richard 'Razor' Blaydes,



flying wing on the CAG, scored his fifth to become VF-2's 25th ace, while Lt(jg) 'Zesk' Zaeske was credited with a victory moments later that made him the unit's 26th ace. The final action of the day came mid-afternoon when the strike launched at 1400 hrs attacked two coastal cargo vessels, ace 'Tex' Vineyard exploding one and leaving the second sinking.

Lt Bill Blair led the first sweep of the day on 13 September, the Hellcat pilots intercepting a mixed formation of Ki-43s (identified as 'Zekes') and fixed undercarriage Ki-27 'Nate' fighters at 4000 ft over Negros Island. The veteran Naval Aviators made short work of their JAAF opponents, with three 'Nates' and four 'Oscars' being destroyed. Blair got one of the Ki-27s to become VF-2's 27th ace, with fellow aces Bill Dean, Ken Lake, Byron Johnson, John Banks and Lloyd Barnard also claiming one apiece. The final kill went to Ens Evald Holmgaard, who was flying his first mission with 'Fighting Two'. His 'Oscar' was the squadron's 245th victory of the cruise.

On 14 September the American air armada swept over Davao Gulf, off Mindanao, in search of a convoy in the Sulu Sea. A large Japanese destroyer was spotted and 'pretty well shot up', according to the records kept by Lt(jg) Morrissey.

The following day TG 38.1 arrived off Halmahera to cover MacArthur's forces when they invaded Morotai. Ace 'Gabe' Gabriel saw the only aerial action on the 15th when he shot down a Japanese twin-engined bomber (that he misidentified as a 'Betty') attempting to snoop on the fleet. On 16 September 'Butch' Voris' division attempted to give support to a downed pilot from another squadron who was drifting ashore at Halmahera. The Naval Aviator was later rescued by PT boats that braved shore fire to pull him from the water minutes before he would have been washed ashore. *Hornet* and its group then turned north and headed toward Manila, capital of the Philippines.

At 0740 hrs on 21 September Hargreaves and Banks shared in the destruction of another snooper, which they claimed was a 'Judy'. Despite heavy weather that had battered TG 38.1 for almost 48 hours, the first strike on Manila was launched at 0800 hrs. Ken Glass of VT-2 remembered that conditions over the harbour were clear as his division made its first ever torpedo strike against the many ships below. As the torpedo- and dive-bombers went to work on the vessels, a JAAF formation of 20 to 30 fighters suddenly swept in. 'Tex' Harris recalled;

'The "Tonys" came in after one flight and completed a run. We scissored, then turned and started climbing, and were soon in position for a tail run from below. The leading "Tony" turned to the left and dropped its nose – a burst from my guns hit it in the cockpit and the fighter exploded. The second and third were fired on by my wingmen and both went down to watery graves. We then splashed another that tried to outrun us. Moments later I saw "Gabe" in difficulty, surrounded by three "Tonys". We dove on them and they turned away, which was a good thing since we were nearly out of ammo.'

'Tex' Harris, 'Gabe' Gabriel and 'Gene' Redmond downed a Ki-61 'Tony' apiece. David Berrey (who had claimed a kill with VF-24 on a previous cruise) and Holmgaard in the second division each scored a 'Tony' as well, while 'Andy' Skon's division hit a mixed formation of Ki-61s and Ki-43s (again described as 'Zekes') and shot down five –



Former VF-10 pilot Lt Bill Blair led VF-2's first sweep over Negros Island on 13 September and duly downed a 'Nate' fighter to become 'Fighting Two's' 27th ace (US Navy)

Skon claimed one of each. Skon's section leader, Mike Noble, downed two 'Tonys', while Lester Sipes flamed one to become VF-2's 28th, and last, ace.

As aerial opposition died away, the torpedo- and dive-bombers of the task group were able to report the destruction of some 15 cargo ships in the harbour.

Despite heavy seas persisting throughout the night, the first strike was launched at 0630 hrs on the 22nd. One hour later a Japanese strike force was picked up on radar and the task group went to General Quarters. A solitary enemy aircraft identified as a bomb-carrying Zero-sen penetrated the task group and strafed *Hornet's* flightdeck. Fortunately, its bomb hung up and failed to drop until the fighter had overflowed the ship. Nevertheless, three flightdeck crew were wounded, one seriously. After 30 minutes the surviving Japanese aircraft departed, with several shot down by the escorting destroyers and cruisers. 'Fighting Two' had also claimed two of them, with Charlie Harbert chasing a 'Tony' down at low altitude that crashed into the sea without the Hellcat pilot having to open fire. 'Gene' Redmond was credited with the other kill, a lone 'Zeke'.

At 0940 hrs, during CAG-2's final strike on Manila, 'Spider' Webb downed another Ki-61 and 'Tex' Vineyard destroyed the wingman that had latched onto Webb's tail. These proved to be VF-2's final aerial successes of the Pacific War.

Having seen no action on 23 September, CAG-2 undertook a final day of strikes at long range against the Visayan Islands on the 24th. The first targets hit were off Corom Island, with Helldivers and Avengers sinking two destroyers and leaving a light cruiser badly damaged.



Lt(jg) Lester Sipes claimed a 'Tony' over Laguna De Bay Lake on 21 September for his fifth, and last victory. This in turn made him VF-2's 28th, and last, ace (US Navy)

Cdr William 'Bill' Dean, CO of VF-2, displays his final score of 11 victories on the side of his F6F-5 Hellcat – this aircraft was specially marked up after *Hornet* had left the combat theatre and was heading back to Manus. Dean consciously assigned all pilots for missions so as to maximise individual opportunities for them to score, rather than giving the best missions to the top-scorers. The result was VF-2 created 28 aces out of 40 pilots during its tour – a US Navy record (US Navy)



During a second strike on Panay Island, Ens 'Obie' O'Brien, who had joined the squadron just before it departed Eniwetok at the end of August, was shot down and killed by AA. He would prove to be 'Fighting Two's' final combat casualty.

On 25 September word was received that CAG-2 would be relieved upon *Hornet's* arrival in Manus anchorage in the Admiralty Islands – the vessel reached Manus three days later. Six months and 14 days after coming aboard, CAG-2 departed the ship while the band played 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'California, Here I Come!' After several days at Manus, CAG-2 boarded a CVE during the afternoon of 6 September and departed at 0745 hrs the following morning, bound for Majuro. The vessel arrived here on 11 September, then headed for Pearl Harbor the following day – the one year anniversary of CAG-2's departure from San Francisco. Arriving in Pearl Harbor on 18 October, personnel boarded a troop transport five days later and arrived in San Francisco on a foggy 29 October. The ship tied up at Pier Seven on the Embarcadero at 1600 hrs, and as Ken Glass recalled, 'the welcome home party lasted three days'.

During the course of its combat tour from November 1943 to the end of September 1944, 'Fighting Two' had destroyed 506 enemy aircraft, including 245 on the ground. With an overall tally of 262 aerial victories (the combined total for both the second and third VF-2s), 'Fighting Two' would rank third behind VF-17's 315 aerial victories and VF-15's 310. Remarkably, the unit lost only three Hellcats and their pilots in aerial combat for a nearly nine-to-one victory-loss ratio, with a further four pilots and their aircraft downed by enemy AA fire. VF-2's tally of 28 pilots achieving 'ace' status during the tour is an unbroken American record.

Lt(jg) Ken Glass (right) and his VT-2 crew discuss the recent sinking of a Japanese destroyer escort north of Iwo Jima in front of the CAG-2 scoreboard that adorned CV-12's island (US Navy)

APPENDICES

Aces of VF-2

Name and Final Rank with VF-2	Score with VF-2	Wartime Total
Cdr William A Dean	11	11
Lt(jg) Daniel A Carmichael	9	13 (4 with VBF-12)
Lt Arthur Van Haren	9	9
Lt(jg) John L. Banks	8.5	8.5
Lt(jg) Everett C Hargreaves	8.5	8.5
Lt Lloyd G Barnard	8	8
Lt Landis E Doner	8	8
Lt(jg) Franklin T Gabriel	8	8
Lt Richard J Griffin	8	8
Lt Cdr Leroy E Harris	8	9.25 (1.25 with VF-10)
Lt(jg) Byron M Johnson	8	8
Lt(jg) Myrvin E Noble	7	7
Lt(jg) Eugene D Redmond	7	9.25 (2.25 with VF-10)
Lt(jg) Warren A Skon	7	7
Lt(jg) Wilbur B Webb	7	7
Lt(jg) John T Wolf	7	7
Lt(jg) Charles H Carroll	6	6
Ens Kenneth B Lake	6	6
Lt(jg) Merriwell W Vineyard	6	6
Lt Roy M Voris	6	7 (1 with VF-10)
Lt William K Blair	5	5
Ens Richard B Blaydes	5	5
Ens Leroy W Robinson	5	5
Ens Ross F Robinson	5	5
Lt(jg) Robert W Shackford	5	5
Lt(jg) Lester H Sipes	5	5
Lt(jg) Clyde P Spitler	5	5
Lt(jg) Earling W Zaeske	5	5
Lt Noel A M Gayler	2	5 (3 with VF-3)
Lt Albert O Vorse	2	11.5 (0.5 with VF-3, 3 with VF-6 and 6 with VF-80)
Ens Willard E Eder	1	6.5 (0.5 with VF-3 and 5 with VF-29)

1

F6C-1 Hawk BuNo A6969/black 2-F-1 flown by Lt Cdr G F Chapline, Commanding Officer of VF-2B, NAS San Diego, California, 1928

In 1928 VF-2B became the first squadron to demonstrate the concept of dive-bombing, carrying out mock attacks on Pacific Fleet ships whose commanders had expected standard, low-altitude, level bombing, but were surprised when the VF-2B aircraft attacked, unseen, from 12,000 ft, making simulated drops before the ships' defences could be manned. The fully restored F6C in the National Naval Aviation Museum at NAS Pensacola has been marked up in these colours.

2

F2B-2 BuNo A7711/black 2-F-1 flown by NAP 1/c George F Ocskay, USS *Langley* (CV-1), eastern Pacific, 1930

VF-2B took over VF-1B's 'worn-out' F2B-2 fighters in 1930, making two cruises aboard *Langley* with the aircraft. Note the 'Flying Chiefs' rank emblem beneath the cockpit.

3

F4B-4 BuNo A8913/black 2-F-13 flown by Lt(jg) Richard H 'Dick' Best, VF-2, NAS San Diego, California, 1935

'Dick' Best, who served with VF-2 from 1935 to 1939, was the Fifth Section Leader for much of that time. He then transferred to dive-bombers in 1940, leading VB-6 from *Enterprise* when, on 4 June 1942 at the Battle of Midway, he and his two wingmen sank the Japanese carrier *Akagi*, thus turning the battle firmly in the US Navy's favour. VF-2 was equipped with the F4B-4 from 1934 until 1936.

4

F2F-1 BuNo A9643/black 2-F-1 flown by Lt Cdr Apollo Soucek, Commanding Officer of VF-2, NAS San Diego, California, 1937

Soucek set high-altitude records in 1929 and 1931 as a test pilot at NAS Patuxent River. Under his leadership in 1937-38, VF-2 won all the fleet awards available to a fighter squadron. He later became Chief of Staff to Commander, Naval Air Forces Pacific during World War 2 and retired as a vice admiral. The F2F-1 was Grumman's first single-seat fighter, and VF-2 flew it longer – from 1936 to 1940 – than any other type during the interwar period.

5

F2A-2 Buffalo BuNo 1412/black 2-F-7 flown by Chief NAP Gordon E Firebaugh, NAS San Diego, California, 1940

Firebaugh normally flew 2-F-8, but he was photographed at the controls of F2A-2 2-F-7 – it featured the colourful Third Section Leader's pre-war markings depicted here. VF-2 was the second fleet squadron to re-equip with the F2A, the US Navy's first monoplane fighter, in 1940 after VF-3 had been issued with the F2A-1 in the autumn of 1939. These were among the last US Navy fighters accepted in the colourful pre-war paint schemes and markings. BuNo 1412 was longer lived than most F2As, surviving until it was destroyed in a mid-air collision near Graham's Dairy, in Miami, Florida on 6 February 1943. By then the veteran fighter had been relegated to serving with Operational training command at NAS Miami.

6

F2A-2 Buffalo BuNo 1415/white 2-F-1 flown by Lt Cdr Herbert S Duckworth, Commanding Officer of VF-2, NAS San Diego, California, Spring 1941

During the summer of 1941 the US Navy dramatically changed the camouflage and markings of its aircraft from the colourful pre-war schemes to an overall light aircraft grey, with three-character group white side numbers (squadron number, squadron class/mission letter and aircraft number in squadron) and small national insignia in four positions, namely upper left and lower right wing, and rear fuselage. All aircraft looked identical, bar their individual codes and BuNos – even the CO's Buffalo lacked any distinguishing markings. BuNo 1415 was stricken from active service after its pilot overshot his landing at NAS Jacksonville, Florida, on 10 July 1942. By then the fighter had been relegated to Operational training command.

7

F2A-3 Buffalo BuNo 01549/white 2-F-18 flown by NAP 1/c Howard S Packard, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), December 1941

VF-2 replaced its F2A-2s with F2A-3s (the final version of the Brewster fighter) in late September 1941. Two months later the US Navy changed its camouflage once again, replacing the overall light aircraft grey scheme with blue-grey over light grey. The red/white tail stripe identifier was not adopted until early January 1942. NAP 1/c Howard Packard was subsequently transferred to VF-6 in early 1942, claiming a 'Val' shot down, one probable and one damaged, as well as a fighter damaged, flying F4Fs with 'Fighting Six' that summer. Packard's BuNo 01549 also survived its brief frontline service and was supplied to Operational training command at NAS Miami. It was written off in a forced landing seven miles north of the naval air station on 15 August 1942 following an in-flight engine failure.

8

F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-1 flown by Lt Cdr Paul H Ramsey, Commanding Officer of VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), May 1942

Pre-war Naval Aviator Lt Cdr Paul Ramsey took the reconstituted VF-2 aboard *Lexington* in mid-April 1942, from which the unit participated in the Battle of the Coral Sea on 6-8 May. Ramsey led the escorts for SBD-3 Dauntless dive-bombers from VS-2 and VB-2 in attacks that sank the Japanese carrier *Shoho* on 7 May. He claimed two 'Type 00 VF' fighters (Zero-sens) shot down at 1800 hrs whilst protecting the dive-bombers, possibly in this aircraft. The following day he led the CAP that tried to defend *Lexington* against Japanese attacks. However, the carrier was hit by torpedoes and bombs and later sank. During the course of the engagement Ramsey claimed to have downed a 'Me 109' and probably destroyed a second – he had led his formation in an attack on 'Kate' torpedo-bombers. His F4F-3 bears the '-1' plane in squadron number on its fuselage that was reserved for the CO's aircraft.

9

F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-5 flown by Lt Albert O Vorse, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), May 1942

Vorse was one of seven veteran VF-3 pilots transferred to VF-2 in April 1942 to provide the newly reorganised squadron with Naval Aviators who possessed combat experience. At Coral Sea he led the escorts for the SBD Dauntlesses of VB-2 that attacked *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* on 8 May, although he lost his charges in poor weather en route to the Japanese fleet. Having been forced to return to CV-2 prematurely, Vorse and his two wingmen intercepted a formation of 'Vals' that had just attacked *Lexington*. The future ace made short work of two of the dive-

bombers, and he subsequently received the Navy Cross for his efforts during this mission.

10

F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-13 flown by Lt Noel A M Gayler, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), May 1942

Noel Gayler had received his first Navy Cross in February 1942 while flying with VF-3 in defence of *Lexington* during IJNAF attacks mounted from Rabaul. He was also one of the transferees from 'Fighting Three' to VF-2, arriving with three victories already to his name. Shortly before midday on 8 May Gayler claimed two 'scout bombers' destroyed and a 'Type 00 VF' probably shot down while escorting TBD-1 Devastators of VF-2 in attacks on *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku*, for which he was awarded his second Navy Cross. These victories gave Gayler ace status – he was the first pilot to achieve this distinction whilst serving with VF-2.

11

F4F-3 Wildcat (BuNo unknown) white 2-F-19 flown by Ens Willard E 'Bill' Eder, VF-2, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), May 1942

Originally assigned to VF-3 pre-war, Eder received the DFC for his participation in the strikes on Lae and Salamaua, in New Guinea, in March 1942. Yet another of the VF-3 pilots sent to VF-2, Eder had claimed a 'Type 00 VF' (A6M Zero-sen) destroyed and a 'Type 96 VF' (A5M 'Claude') as a probable while defending *Lexington* from attack on 8 May. He received the Navy Cross for his actions. Eder would have to wait until 18 March 1945 to finally 'make ace'.

12

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 1 flown by Lt Cdr William A 'Bill' Dean, Commanding Officer of VF-2, USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), November-December 1943

Dean 'stood up' the third VF-2 on 1 June 1943 and took it to Hawaii in September. His leadership of the squadron during a fleet exercise held in October so impressed the newly-promoted commander of CAG-6, Cdr Edward H 'Butch' O'Hare (the US Navy's first ace of World War 2), that he requested VF-2 be assigned to his carrier air group for the coming Makin-Tarawa invasions in November. Dean subsequently claimed a 'Betty' destroyed shortly after dawn on 21 November for his first kill. His assigned Hellcat, marked with the CO's 'white 1' on the fuselage and fin, was finished in standard three-tone Non-specular Sea Blue, Intermediate Blue and White camouflage, and it had the short-lived national insignia outlined in red. The small white disc on the fighter's fin was a CAG-2 rather than a CAG-6 identification marking, and it was applied to all VF-2 Hellcats upon their delivery to the unit.

13

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 66168/white 00 flown by Cdr Edward H 'Butch' O'Hare, Commanding Officer of CAG-6, USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), November 1943

O'Hare became the first US Navy ace of the war while defending *Lexington* against attacks by Japanese bombers from Rabaul on 17 February 1942, for which he was later awarded the Medal of Honor. He subsequently led VF-3, which soon became VF-6 – shortly thereafter it was the first fleet squadron to transition from the F4F Wildcat to the F6F Hellcat. O'Hare led the squadron during the early operations of the Central Pacific campaign, before being promoted to command CAG-6 in October 1943. He then took the group, with VF-2 temporarily attached, aboard *Enterprise* on 1 November 1943 to take part in the Gilberts campaign. When the task force encountered nocturnal attacks by land-based IJNAF torpedo-bombers, O'Hare worked with VF-6 and VF-2 to

develop and field the US Navy's first nightfighting 'Bat Teams' aboard *Enterprise*. He was lost whilst at the controls of this aircraft during a night interception mission on 26-27 November 1943, the likely victim of 'friendly fire'. O'Hare's fighter has been adorned with the CAG's '00' 'Double Nuts' modex on its nose, fuselage and fin. This marking, which had first been seen on the Hellcat of CAG-5's Cdr Jimmy Flatley in early 1943, was progressively employed by most CAGs throughout the fleet.

14

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 6 flown by Lt(jg) Warren A 'Andy' Skon, VF-2, USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), November 1943

Once VF-2 was aboard *Enterprise* as part of CAG-6, CAG 'Butch' O'Hare chose Skon to be his wingman during the Gilberts campaign. He was flying as O'Hare's wingman on the second attempted night interception mission of the newly formed 'Bat Teams' when O'Hare was lost. Skon went on to score seven victories with VF-2 flying from USS *Hornet* (CV-12) in 1944.

15

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 32 flown by Lt Arthur Van Haren, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 11 June 1944

Arthur Van Haren was one of very few Hispanics to serve as Naval Aviators in World War 2, and he ended the conflict as the top-scoring Hispanic pilot with nine victories to his name. He was one of nine future VF-2 aces to claim during 'Fighting Two's' first big action on 11 June 1944 over Guam, downing two 'Zekes' in this aircraft.

16

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 41117/white 18 flown by Lt Cdr Leroy E 'Tex' Harris, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 12 June 1944

'Tex' Harris had joined the third VF-2 as its XO when the unit was established on 1 June 1943, having previously seen combat over Guadalcanal with VF-10 the previous year. With 1.25 victories to his credit, he quickly set about 'making ace' with VF-2 during the Marianas campaign. Harris claimed two 'Zekes' in white 18 on 12 June to achieve ace status, having downed an 'Emily' flying boat (in BuNo 40524) the previous day – his first kill with VF-2 had come in November 1943. By the end of 'Fighting Two's' Pacific campaign 'Tex' Harris had taken his score to 9.25 victories.

17

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 40079/white 13 flown by Ensign Donald L Brandt, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 13 June 1944

On 0913 hrs on 13 June 1944, whilst flying white 13 at 13,000 ft, Donald Brandt was targeted by a Japanese flak battery and forced to bail out over Guam's Agaña harbour. Following almost six hours in the water just offshore, he was towed to safety by the lifeguard submarine *Stingray* after the vessel entered the harbour submerged and towed Brandt's life raft back out to sea using its raised periscope. He eventually returned to VF-2 at the end of July.

18

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 25973/white 12 flown by Lt(jg) Earling W Zaeske, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 15 June 1944

Having joined the third VF-2 upon its establishment on 1 June 1943, 'Zesk' Zaeske had to wait more than a year to claim his first aerial victories. These came during the afternoon of 15 June, when VF-2 was credited with the destruction of 17 'Zekes' during a sweep over Iwo Jima. Zaeske, flying BuNo 25973, claimed two victories, and he would eventually 'make ace' on 12 September 1944.

19

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 25 flown by Lt Lloyd G Barnard, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 15 June 1944

When TG 58.1 hit Iwo Jima on 15 June 1944, skipper Dean sent only pilots who had yet to score on the first sweep. Over the island, 'Barney' Barnard made the most of the opportunity by downing five 'Zekes' in white 25 to become VF-2's first 'ace in a day' – a feat for which he was awarded the Navy Cross. By the end of the unit's Pacific tour Barnard had increased his tally to eight victories. Post-war, Barnard joined the US Navy's Flight Demonstration Team, the Blue Angels, flying as 'Blue Three' under the leadership of fellow VF-2 ace, and team founder, 'Butch' Voris.

20

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 16 flown by Lt(jg) Meriwell W Vineyard, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 19 June 1944

'Tex' Vineyard was also a combat veteran when he joined VF-2, just not with the US Navy. Frustrated by his country's neutrality, he had joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in December 1940 at the age of 20. Having completed his pilot training and been sent to the UK, Vineyard was duly posted to No 185 Sqn on the embattled island of Malta in April 1942. Flying newly arrived Spitfire VCs, he saw four months of combat (claiming a Bf 109 damaged on 23 June) before returning to England. Transferring to the US Navy in November 1942. He was one of the first pilots to claim a victory on 19 June 1944 – the day of the 'Great Marianas Turkey Shoot'. He downed a 'Zeke' over Orote airfield, on Guam, and ended VF-2's deployment with six victories in total.

21

F6F-3 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 36 flown by Ens Wilbur B 'Spider' Webb, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 19 June 1944

'Spider' Webb was a former NAP who was commissioned as an ensign in 1943 and promoted to lieutenant (junior grade) in November 1944. He was officially credited with six 'Vals' shot down and two more as probables (he had gun camera film for the first four, but the camera had jammed by the time he shot down numbers five to eight, hence the last two being listed as probables only) in a wild engagement over Orote Point, Guam, on 19 June 1944. He was flying white 31 on that occasion, having been at the controls of white 36 during one of his two previous sorties earlier in the day.

22

F6F-3 Hellcat BuNo 40807/white 33 flown by Lt(jg) Everett C 'Connie' Hargreaves, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), 24 June 1944

Hargreaves initially saw combat as a replacement pilot in VF-18 aboard USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) during the first Truk strike and the invasion of Eniwetok in February 1944. Returning to VF-2 as it left for the western Pacific aboard *Hornet* in March 1944, Hargreaves participated in the 'Mission Beyond Darkness' to attack the IJN's Mobile Fleet on 20 June 1944. During the strikes on Iwo Jima four days later, Hargreaves claimed four 'Zekes' shot down during a morning mission in this aircraft, and a fifth that afternoon (in BuNo 25979) to become an 'ace in a day'. During the remaining two months of the deployment he took his final score to 8.5 victories.

23

F6F-3N Hellcat BuNo 42158/white 9 flown by Lt Russell L Reiserer, VF(N)-76 Detachment 2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), July 1944

The four F6F-3N nightfighters assigned to *Hornet* for night defence were also used as 'hecklers' over Guam during the Marianas campaign. Detachment 2 CO Lt Russ Reiserer

claimed a solitary 'Betty' during just such a mission on the night of 7 July. However, his greatest success came at the controls of a radarless Hellcat from VF-2 on 19 June when he too got stuck into the 'Val' dive-bombers that 'Spider' Webb had run across near Orote airfield. Reiserer downed five of the aircraft in quick succession, and destroyed two 'Kates' five days later, again in an F6F-3 from 'Fighting Two'. The handful of Detachment 2 pilots onboard *Hornet* routinely helped VF-2 by flying missions when the fighter squadron found itself at full stretch. Although the nightfighter version of the F6F (as depicted in this profile) was an exceptional aircraft, VF(N)-76 claimed a good number of its 36 victories during daylight hours in Hellcats borrowed from conventional fighter units. Reiserer's Detachment 2 was the most successful of three such flights sent into the fleet, being credited with 27 victories flying from CV-12. Sixteen of these were claimed in F6F-3s, however.

24

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 20 flown by Lt Roy M 'Butch' Voris, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), September 1944

'Butch' Voris first saw combat at Guadalcanal with VF-10 when he claimed a 'Nagoya Zero' destroyed on 15 November 1942, but he was in turn badly wounded moments later. By June 1943 he had recovered sufficiently enough to join VF-2 upon its establishment. Voris first scored with VF-2 on 11 June 1944 while leading a sweep over Guam at the outset of the Marianas campaign. By the end of the tour he had scored seven victories, having 'made ace' on 24 June. Voris claimed his final two victories (both 'Zekes') at the controls of an F6F-5 north-west of Iwo Jima on 3 July. Returning to instructor duty after his tour with VF-2, Voris completely revised the US Navy's advanced fighter training in light of his experiences in combat. In 1946, Voris became 'Blue Angel No 1' when he formed the US Navy's now famous Flight Demonstration Team with F6F-5 Hellcats. He returned to the team in 1952 when it was reformed after having been temporarily disbanded due to the Korean War. During a 22-year naval career that began in biplanes and ended in modern jets, Voris became known as an outstanding aviator. Following his retirement, he was instrumental in the development of the Grumman F-14 Tomcat and the Apollo Lunar Module.

25

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 14 flown by Lt(jg) Daniel A Carmichael, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), September 1944

Carmichael became VF-2's second-ranking ace during his tour, claiming nine victories between April and July 1944. Subsequently posted to F6F-5-equipped VBF-12 in late 1944, he claimed a further four victories with the unit flying from USS *Randolph* (CV-15) on 16-17 February 1945.

26

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 45 flown by Lt(jg) Eugene D 'Red' Redmond, VF-2, USS *Hornet* (CV-12), September 1944

Another VF-10 veteran, 'Red' Redmond opened his score with VF-2 on 17 February 1944 when he downed a 'Zeke' and a 'Val' over Truk. He ended his run over Manila Bay on 21 and 22 September 1944 when he downed a 'Tony' and a 'Zeke'. He was flying this F6F-5 on at least one of these missions, white 45 being unusual as it was a later model Hellcat camouflaged in the three-tone Non-specular Sea Blue, Intermediate Blue and White scheme usually associated with the F6F-3. Redmond was subsequently killed in a flying accident on 3 June 1951 when his F4U-4 BuNo 80947 crashed into the water off the

coast of Korea after a bad catapult shot from USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CV-31). He was serving with VF-783 at the time.

27

F6F-5 Hellcat (BuNo unknown) white 1 flown by Cdr William E 'Bill' Dean, Commanding Officer of VF-2, USS *Hornet*, September 1944

Between November 1943 and September 1944, squadron

commander 'Bill' Dean scored 11 victories to become the unit's leading ace. In July he received one of the first F6F-5s to reach VF-2, marking it with his number 1 as per US Navy regulations for the aircraft assigned to the CO. In late September, after CAG-2 had flown its final combat missions, the fighter was adorned with Dean's tally of victories and bombing missions – a rare personal addition to a VF-2 aircraft that was not seen on other fighters allocated to the unit.

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Front Cover

On 19 June 1944 the seven heavy and eight light carriers of Task Force 58 would engage the Japanese Mobile Fleet in the first carrier clash that had been fought in the Pacific War since the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands on 26 October 1942. Amongst the Hellcat pilots of VF-2 that would take part in the action from the flightdeck of USS *Hornet* (CV-12) was Ens Wilbur B 'Spider' Webb, a native of Ardmore, Oklahoma, who had enlisted in the US Navy in October 1938 and received his Wings of Gold in July 1943.

At 1300 hrs a call was put out throughout CV-12 for volunteers to fly a mission against flak batteries on Guam. Despite having already flown two missions that day, Webb was ready for more. He took off from *Hornet* at 1430 hrs, Webb for once flying his assigned F6F-3, '31' – an event that almost never happened, since pilots were allocated aircraft for missions by their availability. After attacking the guns on the Orote Peninsula in northern Guam, Webb spotted a large formation of Japanese aircraft. These were survivors of the first enemy strikes against the US fleet that were preparing to land. Webb explained what happened next:

'The first aeroplanes were heading for me, and they got to within 100 yards of me before I realised that they were Japanese "Val" dive-bombers, flying in divisions of three. Above the "Vals" were Zero-sens. When they banked away, I could see the large red meatballs. I estimated there were 30 to 40 aeroplanes in all. I thought, "Boy, this is it. Make it good and get as many as you can before they know you're here!" I decided not to gain altitude, but to just slide into their traffic pattern and get as many as I could before I was detected.'

In the wild 15-minute battle that ensued Webb did just that, claiming eight 'Vals' destroyed – he was only credited with six, however, as his gun camera jammed during the latter stages of the action. It was the beginning of VF-2's run to become the second-highest scoring US Navy fighter squadron in the Pacific War (Cover artwork by Mark Postlethwaite)

Dedication

This volume is dedicated to 'Fighting Two' ace Capt Daniel A 'Danny' Carmichael, who passed away during the production of the book

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Osprey Publishing
PO Box 883, Oxford, OX1 9PL, UK
PO Box 3985, New York, NY 10185-3985, USA
E-mail: info@ospreypublishing.com

Osprey Publishing is part of the Osprey Group

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ISBN: 978 1 4728 0558 4

PDF e-book ISBN: 978 1 4728 0562 1

e-Pub ISBN: 978 1 4728 0563 8

Edited by Tony Holmes

Cover Artwork by Mark Postlethwaite

Aircraft Profiles by Jim Laurier

Index by Marie-Pierre

Originated by PDQ Digital Media Solutions, UK

Osprey Publishing is supporting the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity, by funding the dedication of trees.

www.ospreypublishing.com

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support I received from Don Brandt of 'Fighting 2' and Dr Ken Glass of 'Torpedo 2', the only pilots left with us from Carrier Air Group (CAG) 2, who shared their memories and insights about their fellow fliers during the 1944 deployment. Additionally, thank you to Bill Ballenger, historian of the CAG-2 Association, for providing materials unavailable elsewhere, and Deniz Pelvan of the USS *Hornet* (CV-12) Museum for furnishing me with the otherwise unavailable VF-2 cruise book – the bible of everything that happened to everyone in 1944, as well as the source of many of the photographs used in this volume. Hill Goodspeed of the National Naval Aviation Museum went 'above and beyond' the call of duty to provide material on the original VF-2 'Flying Chiefs' and 'The Rippers' who fought at Coral Sea. This book would not exist without their enthusiasm and support.

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